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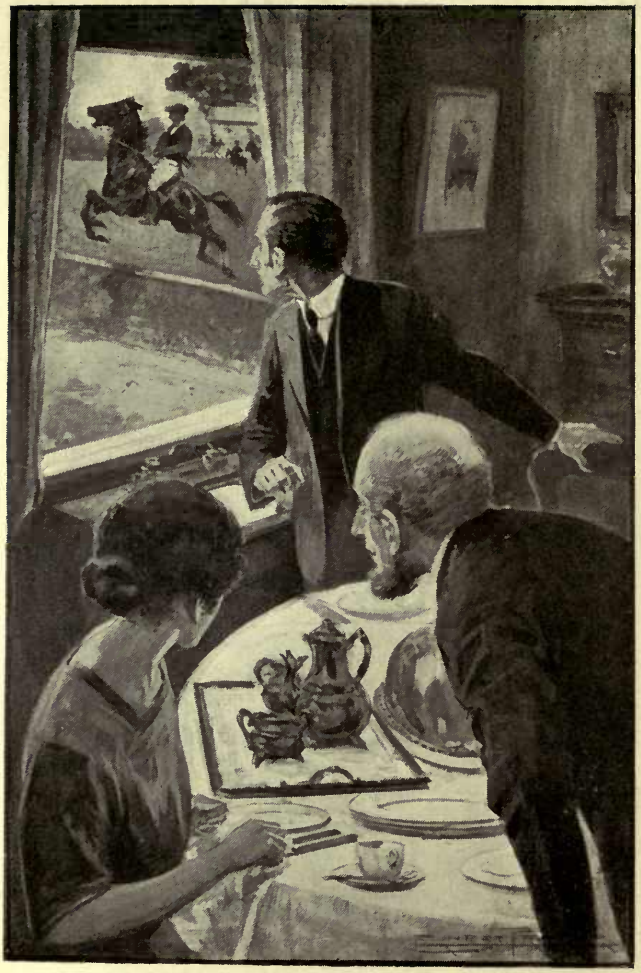
1835

MUSTARD AND CRESS.

More Scenes from the Life-Story of Joe Wentworth, the Summerton Humorist.



A Flying Leap.

Frontispiece.

MUSTARD AND CRESS.

A HUMOROUS STORY.

BY

S. HORTON.

Author of "Roses and Thistles"; "Wheat and Chaff"; "Gold and Dross"; "Mud and Marble"; "For King and Parliament"; "Appleblossom"; Etc., Etc.

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CONTENTS.

CHAP.		PAGE.
I.	Joe Wentworth	7
II.	The Silver Wedding	17
III.	The Red Acres and its Servants ...	26
IV.	Miss Davies' Lover	36
V.	Eggs	44
VI.	A Fertile Brain	50
VII.	Joe makes a Proposition	60
VIII.	The Ministers' Fraternal	72
IX.	The Horse Parade	82
X.	Some Bunches of Grapes	93
XI.	Joe at the Flower Show	101
XII.	The Rinderpest	111
XIII.	Joe as a Hero	122
XIV.	The New Schoolmistress	131
XV.	An Impromptu Dinner...	141
XVI.	A Village Tragedy	150
XVII.	A Tragedy of Wealth	157
XVIII.	A Modern Miracle	166
XIX.	A Lesson in Kindness to Animals	176
XX.	A Miss is as good as a Mile ...	184
XXI.	A Pair of Rascals	192
XXII.	Joe as Sherlock Holmes	199
XXIII.	Run to Earth	207
XXIV.	Gwen's Christmas	216

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CHAPTER I.

JOE WENTWORTH.

"It takes all sorts of folks to make a world; but the sort that can least be spared is the sort that is most unlike every other sort."—J. W.

IN the gloaming of a fine autumn evening, Joe Wentworth stood leaning over the garden gate of the Red Acres farmhouse, whistling "The Last Rose of Summer." The sun had set amidst gorgeous tints of red, purple and crimson, and the afterglow still lingered in the sky. The solemn silence which fell on the earth seemed full of music. The stable lads had been playing cricket in the field behind the farmhouse, but the captain had just drawn wickets because the light had become too uncertain for bowling, and their noisy shouts had died away as they had taken a walk, at the suggestion of one of their number, to the village of Summerton, of which the square tower of the church steeple could just be discerned on the hill. They had gone, full of growing admiration for their "boss," for he had come on the scene during the afternoon in the midst of their game and requested permission to try a ball. He had bowled the whole six of them out without any one of them being able to get a single run.

"I guess I surprised those youngsters," he said to himself as he stood looking at the last patch of light in the sky; "they thought I was too owd, and cranky,

for that sort of thing. I hanno had any practice for a few years, but it's wonderful how it comes back. But who is yon, roaming along the road, I wonder? It looks like a courting couple. Well!" he continued, as they drew nearer, "I do declare. It's our Rufe and his wife, and they are arm in arm, billin' and cooin' like a pair of turtle doves."

"Hullo, Rufe!" he exclaimed; "out doing a bit of courtin', eh?"

"Yes," replied the newcomer; "Lucy and I thought we would have a stroll over as it was such a fine neet, just to see how you were gettin' on."

"It's the first time for two months," replied the farmer. "I'll bet half a crown against a pinch of black pepper, I con guess first try what you are after. It binna your poor, lone, bachelor brother you care for; it's what's in his pockets. Beggin', as usual, and not havin' cheek enough to ask yourself, you've brought the wife to do it for you. How's that for the bull's eye?"

"Wrong. It dunno hit the target even," replied the other, with a laugh that was good to hear.

"Then I shall begin to think the Vicar was reet on Sunday when he said the days of miracles binna past. Perhaps you've come to tell me that you've left me a thousand pounds in your will?"

"No! That would be like taking coals to Newcastle; but we've come to invite you to our silver wedding. We ha' bin married twenty-five years next Wednesday, and we are goin' to have a few friends to tea and supper, and we want you to come, of course."

"Married twenty-five years!" exclaimed Joe. "You have my sympathy, ma'am," turning to his brother's wife. "How any woman con ha' put up wi' our Rufe

for twenty-five years is past my comprehension. You must ha' a temper as sweet as an angel, though I dunno see that you've got any wings buddin'. Misfortune was close to your elbow the day you hitched on wi' him."

"I don't think so," she replied. "It was the best day's work I ever did."

"It is very nice and sweet of you to say so, and it's just what I should expect from you. But you made a great mistake, missus; you married the wrong brother. It was *me* you ought to ha' had. But our Rufe always did get my things, and I always had to take the leavings. When we were youngsters he ate the apples we stole and I got the thrashings; he got the meat and I had the bone to pick; he pilfered the sugar and I had the toothache. You and I would ha' made a handsome pair, mum; though I say it as shouldna."

"Nay! nay!" Rufus answered, with another of his heartsome laughs. "It's best as it is. Lucy and I have pulled in double harness wi'oot a hitch, but you would ha' worried her to death wi' your jokes and untidy ways. Besides, while I was courtin' you were globe trottin' in Asia, and America, and the Lord only knows where. If she'd waited for you, she'd a bin waitin yet, for it's my opinion that you ha' not bin married because you hanno courage enough to propose either to her, or to any other woman."

"Well, maybe your reet. I might ha' been married, and well married, a score of times, but when I was about to propose my heart came into my mouth, and havin' such a big heart, and such a little mouth, before I could get it out again the opportunity was gone. But come in, unless you want to do a bit of spoonin' in the moonleet. If you do, you'd better

go into the orchard, and wait for the moon to rise. But dunno let any of the boys or wenches see you, becos one rule at the Red Acres is 'no courtin' allowed' by any young folks till they've cum to years of discretion; say ninety, or thereabouts."

"That's 'hard lines," said Rufus. "It is a rule that is better honoured in its breach than in its observance. I, for one, shouldna obey it if I lived here. I believe in courtin' a couple of years, at least, before marriage and sixty years after. But how is the housekeeper?"

"She is all reet. As short as cake wi' plenty of butter in, and as hot as Indian curry. She gave me a dressin' down for goin' into the parlour wi' boots on—after coming out of the cow shed. She said I spoiled the carpet, and she wouldna have it. Think of that. *My* own parlour, *my* own boots, and *my* own carpet, mind you!"

"Serve you reet; dinna it, Lucy?" replied his brother. "You ought to know better."

"Oh, I know you'll stick up for the women, whatever they say, or do. It's part of your craftiness. Keep reet wi' the ladies and you con let the men look after themselves. It would ha' saved me a lot of trouble if I'd learned that lesson earlier."

By this time they had reached the door of the house, and he opened it and shouted, "Hallo, miss; here is a couple of sweethearts called to gi' you a lesson in courtin'." And turning to Mrs. Wentworth, he added, "Walk reet in ma'am, she wonno hurt you. She con be as sweet as plum jam and honey when she likes."

From an inner apartment a young lady came forward to greet the visitors with a winsome smile. She was very daintily dressed, and had a beautiful face,

with a rich profusion of dark, auburn hair. This was Miss Davies, Joe's housekeeper.

"I am so glad to see you both," she exclaimed. "I was just thinking about you, and wondering how I could send you some of our cream cheese."

"Think of owd Beelzebub and you'll see him pop in his nose," grunted the farmer. "That dunno mean you," he continued, addressing his brother's wife; "but anybody else in the company con take it or leave it as they like."

"Mr. Wentworth," said Miss Davies to Rufus, "you really will have to take your brother in hand. He is getting quite out of control. I told him I should report him when I saw you."

"Why, what has he bin doing?" asked Rufus, while Joe grinned and made faces behind his housekeeper's back.

"Well, the other day, when the Vicar and Sir John Crookworth called and I was out, he pressed them both to stop to luncheon. And he put on the table half a loaf of stale bread, a piece of cheese that was covered with mould, which one of the girls had dragged from a shelf where I keep the bits for the swill tub, and some sour milk, and he was telling them that was the kind of thing he had to put up with. From sheer politeness they were trying to swallow a little, when fortunately I returned from Stourbridge and saved the situation, and he declared that it was no use having visitors unless they ate up the scraps you couldn't eat yourself. I did feel ashamed when I saw what Sir John had on his plate. Then, the next day, he had a gentleman here buying horses, and he was trying to make out that he lived the life of a toad under a harrow; and that he hardly dares say his soul is his own."

"Neither dare I," ejaculated Joe. "Before she came I hung my hat on the corner of a picture, and put my boots on the top of the piano, and my coat inside the clock, and kept my brushes inside the cheese press, and nobody said a word. But now it's 'put your leggin's here,' and 'your hat there,' and if I dunno do it then there is trouble. I darena wipe my nose on an antimaccassar now, or wear a pair of stockings wi' a hole in them any bigger than a pin's head, or there is a fuss. In Dunning's time I wore them till there was more hole than stocking, and as for eatin' peas wi' a knife, I might almost as well think of drinkin' tea out of my shavin' mug."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Rufus. "It's time somebody took you in hand."

"She bribes you wi' mince pies and cream cheese," cried Joe. "It binna fair, but the missis will take my part, I know."

"Indeed, no!" replied Mrs. Wentworth. "If you put your shoes on the piano."

"When I came I found his best coat hung in the boot cupboard and his silk hat was filled with rabbit netting under the bed," said Miss Davies. "And he kept his farmer's bills under his prayer book."

"I always knew where to find that netting in those days," said Joe. "Now it is in the stable somewhere —nobody knows where. She will want me to put my hair in curl papers next; like she puts her own," he added maliciously, with a glance at her.

"That's a fib," she replied hotly, with a blush. "I do not put——"

"Oh, well!" he broke in, "dunno get crusty. I remember reading that Queen Elizabeth, or was it Queen Anne, or Queen Mary did? Anyhow, it was some queen, so you need not turn your nose up as

if it was beneath you. But what do you think, Lydia? This sprightly young couple are going to celebrate their silver wedding, and Rufus is goin' to invite all his friends, you and me included, and is goin' to give us a good tuck out and a present of not less than five pound in silver all round as a thankofferin'. I'll have mine in five shilling pieces, because it will look bigger. I expect you'll want yours in threepenny bits. They'd come in so handy for collections."

"Come, come!" said Rufus in an admonitory tone.

"That's what we mean to do, dunno we, Lydia?" replied Joe. "I wouldna miss it for anything. Mind you get in plenty of brandy, and port wine, and good twist tobacco."

"Those who want them must go elsewhere," replied Rufus, who was a strict teetotaler, as his brother well knew. "We dunno use them ourselves, and dunno provide them for our guests. But we con give them some pure wine in nature's own bottles. I've some of the finest bunches of grapes you ever clapped eyes upon. We ha' got some black Hamburg's, nearly as big as walnuts."

"All reet. We will be there and do our duty to the full extent of our capabilities. I wish I'd a mouth as wide as that of a chap I once knew. It was so big he could sing a duet all by himself."

"Do you really mean you have been married twenty-five years?" asked Miss Davies, turning to Mrs. Wentworth.

"Yes, dear," she replied. "And you will come, won't you?"

"Thank you, very much; I shall love to come. But you don't look as though you had been married more than half that time."

"No, but Rufe does," said Joe. "He has only

three hairs left on his head, and one of them looks as if it was loose. I should like to know how many lover's quarrels you two have had in that time."

"Not one," Rufus replied. "Have we, lass? We hanno always seen alike, but we ha' agreed to differ. There have bin no quarrels to make up at our house."

"What a monotonous life you must have lived! If I ever married it would be for the joy of falling out, and then making it up. I remember a chap in America whose wife used to ruffle up about once a month. And when she got to boiling point she used to smash the furniture and throw the crockery about, and I used to think what a good time they must have had when they went to replace the breakages. It would be, not a silver weddin' but a golden one once per month. You dunno know anythin' of the joy of life, Rufe."

"Not of that kind of joy, and I dunno want to. But we mon be going now; eh, lass?"

"Not till you ha' had some supper!" exclaimed Miss Davies. "Why, you've only just come; you must stop."

"You'd better," said Joe, "or we wunno come near that randy-dazzle of yours. Lydia has got some pork and potatoe pies she wants eatin' up. At least, if she doesn't I do. She calls them pork and potatoe; but three parts are potatoes and so is the other part. As for the crust; well, you'd better say your prayers before you tackle it. She has been lettin' the cat out of the bag about me, and now it's my turn."

"What pies I have I shall keep for you, sir!" she answered. "I have not told your brother what a trick you served our neighbour, Widow Porter. Her pig got staked and died, and she was in a sad way about it, as she was feeding it to pay the rent, and she came and wanted your brother to let her have

a small one on trust and she would pay him for it when she could. And——"

"Here, Lydia, you'd better get supper ready," broke in the farmer, wriggling about in his seat. "I'm ravenously hungry, and so is Rufe."

"You must wait until I have finished my story," she replied, continuing, "And he would not, pretending to be as cross as two sticks, and told her she wasn't fit to be trusted with a pig, and then left her weeping, so that I had to go out and comfort her. But the next morning, there was a bigger, and fatter pig in her stye than the one she had lost. He has never owned up, but Bill, the waggoner, said that the best pig we had was missing."

"Bill is too fond of lettin' his tongue run away wi' him," said Joe. "He never tells the truth if a lie will serve his turn. We hanno lost a pig. They were all in the styes to-night."

"Yes; but one stye was at Widow Porter's cottage. Who put that pig there, I should like to know?"

"I didna," said Joe. "I slept all neet and paid attention to it."

"That pig belongs to the Red Acres, for I've been over and seen it. I knew it by the spot on its left ear," said Miss Davies.

"You might as well say you knew it by the curl in its tail. But trust a woman to tattle, and where the facts wunno fit, to make them join up by running a tuck in. But about this affair on Wednesday. Remember, Lydia, when I go to Whitehurst I buy a new blue tie, a red waistcoat, and a pair of lavender kid gloves. I believe if you do a thing at all, doin' it properly."

When Miss Davies and Mrs. Wentworth had left the room, Joe turned to his brother and said, "Dunno

you believe a word she said about that pig, Rufe. She's a fine wench but she has too much imagination."

"I knew all about it before I came," Rufus said. "It's all over Summerton. It's no use, Joe, trying to hide your light under a bushel. In this case it has burnt a hole through. The fact is, Sam told his wife under a pledge of secrecy that you ordered him to take the pig at four o'clock in the morning to Widow Porter's, and his wife told somebody else."

"Humph!" grunted Joe. "I've heard say the three quickest ways of spreading news is by telegraphy, telephone, and tell-a-woman. As for Sam, I'll see what a horse whip will do in developing the bump of secretiveness."

"You needna be huffed about it," said Rufus. "It binna anything to be ashamed of. When I heard of it I felt proud I'd got a brother who would do such an act."

"Well," replied Joe, "I conno say that I return the compliment, but nobody con ever say I chose my own relations."

CHAPTER II.

THE SILVER WEDDING.

"Twenty-five years is a long time to be livin' in the same house together wi'oot a row. It is very praiseworthy, but it must be very monotonous."—J.W.

RUFUS WENTWORTH was undoubtedly the most potent personality in the village of Summerton. While his brother Joe had been a wanderer in distant parts of the earth three parts of his life, Rufus had settled down, and had gradually, by industry and character, built up a business as market gardener, which ultimately developed almost entirely into the growing of roses among the flowers, and grapes among fruits, and in both he was unrivalled for many miles around. His rose garden covered many acres, and while his vinery was on a more limited scale, he still grew very respectable quantities.

At the time, however, that our present story commences, he had made a modest little fortune, and was following his vocation not as a means of making money so much as because of his love for it. As a rosarian he was fast getting a national reputation. He was greatly revered and "looked up to" by the villagers, and everybody who was in trouble went to him for help and guidance. His practical wisdom, unstinted generosity, and unfailing good humour made him the most popular man in the neighbourhood.

In religion he was a Methodist, but he and the vicar,

the Rev. Bedford Bird, were on the closest terms of intimacy, and by no one was he held in higher esteem. His brother Joe, who had no sense of reverence, declared "that Rufe and the Vicar had entered into a compact to blow each other's trumpets, and that if the one said the moon was made of toasted cheese, the other would say he helped at the toasting of it.

"The Vicar looks as though butter wouldna melt in his mouth, and our Rufe has such an innocent smile that he might deceive an angel; but they are both as cute as an old fox that has nearly been caught fifty times, but has always saved his brush by some lucky chance. There binna a dodge for wheedling folks into lettin' 'em have their own way they dunno know."

But in his heart Joe had a great respect for both of them; and while he depreciated them in his own speech, would allow nobody else to do so in his hearing.

On the morning of the celebration of his silver wedding, Rufus was busy cutting roses and putting them into little boxes; for he and his wife had conceived the idea of sending a few, with a bunch of grapes, to every cottage in the village, so that all their poorer neighbours might have a little share in their rejoicing. Over the wall of his garden he exchanged greetings with everybody who passed along the street. By-and-by his brother came along, driving a high-stepping horse.

"Mornin', Rufe!" he exclaimed jovially. "I shall be a bit late for that randy-dazzle of yours, so mind you keep me some of the good things. I've got to meet Lord Harringay and a few friends of his about some hosses, and I canno afford to throw away the chance of makin' an honest copper or two. I dunno

pick my bread and butter up under rose bushes. I ha' to earn it by the sweat of my brain."

"Sorry you conno get early," replied his brother; "but we wonno hurry the tea. I'd like you to be wi' us. Gwen and Lucy are lookin' forward to your comin'. They have a rod in pickle for you. They say they sent for two dozen eggs from you to make omelettes wi', and every one was addled."

"I conno help that, con I? If the hens lay rotten eggs they monno blame me. The fact is, since I lent you Methodists my orchard the other week for that preachin' tornament and tea-fight my poultry have done badly. I expect the sermons stuck in their gizzards and made 'em sick."

"Nonsense!" replied Rufus. "Lucy declares those eggs seem as if they had been a sittin' partly hatched."

"So they were," said Joe. "A fine old leghorn had been sitting on 'em for over a week, when one neet a fox who likes hens came along and carried her off; and I couldna afford to lose both the eggs and the hen; so when Gwen came for a couple of dozen I let her ha' 'em as a special favour. I didna know whether your wife could use them as eggs or chickens, but in either case she got a bargain."

"All reet; wait till tea-time!" cried Rufus. "If you dunno get your hair curled, then my name binna Wentworth."

"Well there is one thing, they conno practise that on you, for you've as much hair on your head as a hoss has on the bottom of his hoofs. Hallo!" he cried, as Gwen, the adopted daughter of Rufus, came along the path, swinging a basket of flowers. "Here is the Princess. Fine morning, miss!" he cried; "I hope you've cut your finger nails, for Rufus says you're going to scratch my face!"

"Hallo, Uncle Joe," she replied. "I did not see you."

"You would if I'd been forty years younger. All the young men in the place are complainin' that you've bewitched them, and all the girls are threatening breach of promise cases."

"You are an untruthful old man," she replied; "but you're coming to our tea, are you not?"

"Well, I dunno know; I've important business on hand, and I'm not sure that I shall be able to get back in time."

"But you must. It's dad's and ma's silver wedding, you know."

"I ought to know by now," replied Joe. "It's about the one hundred and fiftieth time I've been towd. I dunno see there's much to make a fuss about. Two owd folks who got married twenty-five years ago, and ha' regretted it ever since, have a flare up to celebrate the fact that neither of them has been his own master all these years. If it was me I should want to forget I ever did so foolish a thing. But there is nothin' so queer as folks."

"There are as many untruths in that speech as you could well pack into so many words, as you know reet well, Joe. You dunno realise what you've missed in not getting married," replied Rufus.

"No, I dunno; but I've a good guess. I've missed havin' to get up in a mornin', and go to bed, just when somebody else pleases. I've missed havin' a woman's hand always in my pocket as well as my own. I've missed black looks whenever I get home late at neet, and blue ones when I get there too early. I've missed havin' to rock the cradle and walk the floor on a cowd winter's neet, singin' 'I want to be an angel,' or 'Hush-a-bye baby.' Oh, yes, I've

missed a lot, but I'm resigned and happy. However, I mon be goin' or this hoss will get it into his head that I'm as big a gossip as my relations. Keep some of the good things till I come!"

"Yes," Gwen replies; "we are keeping two of the eggs you gave me, specially for you. You like them hard-boiled, don't you?"

"Never eat eggs," he replied mendaciously. "Ta-ta!"

She flung a rosebud into the trap as he shook the reins.

"I'll wear this all day in honour of the prettiest girl I've seen this morning!" he cried.

"Thank you, Uncle Joe," she replied. "Now I will keep you some cake."

He drove away at a pace that most men would have described as furious riding, whistling merrily. When he reached the town, the first thing he did was to drive up to the best silversmith's and select a silver tea and coffee set, which he immediately despatched to Summerton, with instructions that they were to be left at his brother's house with the kind regards of the Vicar. Then he bought a silver-backed hair brush and comb, and sent them in the name of Miss Davies, his housekeeper at Red Acres Farm. A little later he bought a set of fish carver and knives, and despatched them, with the best compliments of one of Rufus's fellow-Methodists. A silver purse for Mrs. Wentworth, a silver-knobbed walking stick for Rufus, a pair of silves vases, and a cake basket were all purchased, and each sent in the name of some of Rufus's many friends.

A little later he met Lord Harringay and two acquaintances, to whom he was introduced as possible buyers of horses for the coming hunting season.

"Forbes, Cobham, and I were coming through Whitehurst on our way to London," said Lord Harringay, "and I told them I would wire you to meet us, as we had not time to come over to the Red Acres. Now, what have you got in the way of horses that are first-class?"

"Three," replied Joe; "as good as hosses are made, and two others that I wouldna put in the second-class for fear of hurting their pride, but which can hardly be called the tip-top thing in hossflesh."

"I've told my friends they can trust your word absolutely, and that your recommendation is a sufficient guarantee of any horse," said Lord Harringay.

"Thank you, my Lord; I'm proud to ha' your good opinion, and prouder of the fact that I deserve it. The mon dunno live who con say he trusted me and was taken in. There are, however, a goodish few who didna trust me, of whom I couldna say the same."

"I think we will take those five horses between us," said Lord Harringay. "Forbes wants two, and Cobham one, and I can do well with the other two."

"I will sell you the three, my lord, willingly, but I'm not so sure about the other two. They are not quite up to your average, and I dunno want to lower the standard."

"I've always heard," said Forbes, "that there was a good deal of cheating in the horse trade. It's quite refreshing to meet a dealer who is so candid."

"I make no boast on it," retorted Joe. "It pays. My customers trust me, and I clap on an extra sovereign, now and then, for being virtuous. Our Rufe said 'we shall get rewarded for honesty when we go to heaven'; but I tell him I take good care to have a little of mine on account down here."

The three gentlemen laughed at this whimsical

speech, and then Lord Harringay said, "Well, we will take the three, I think, if we can agree, as I am sure we shall, about the price."

"I hope Mr. Wentworth won't in this case put an extra sovereign on, or reward himself for being honest," said Mr. Cobham.

"I wonno promise. Our Rufe and his wife are havin' a kind of randy-dazzle to-day, because they have pulled together in double harness for twenty-five years and hanno kicked over the traces. And I've to make 'em some sort of a present, and I'm towd it mon be silver. I've tried to get something cheap and plated, but I hanno succeeded. I've a kind of notion of buying 'em a teaspoon each, if it binna too expensive, and I mon make a bit out of somebody. My prices are ——" (naming a pretty big figure). "Take 'em or leave 'em."

"Twenty-five less each would be nearer the mark," rejoined Cobham.

"Then there is no deal," replied Joe. "I never accept less than my first offer. It is that or nothing. There is no harm done—only, Rufe will ha' to go wi'oot his teaspoons, and must stir his tea wi' a lead pencil."

"Not so fast, Wentworth," said Lord Harringay. "I should have told my friends what your business methods are, and I know your price is *the* price. Well, I'll take the three at the money on condition you keep them another month."

"Two, if you like, my lord. It's a deal, and I'll pay for luncheon."

"No," said Cobham; "you came to suit our convenience. I take one of the horses, Harringay, and pay the piper at lunch."

"I'll take another," said Forbes. "I must say I

like Mr. Wentworth's way of doing business; but it's the first time I ever bought a horse without seeing it."

"If you dunno like it after a month's trial, send it back," said Joe. "I always make that offer when dealing wi' gentlemen. I've never had a hoss returned yet; but it would be all reet if I did."

Over luncheon Lord Harringay set himself to draw Joe out for the amusement of his friends, and the fun was fast and furious and Joe told a number of his experiences.

When Joe arrived at his brother's they were in the midst of tea. His appearance was heartily welcomed by all the company, consisting of about a dozen persons, all old friends.

"We had nearly given you up," said Rufus. "Here Gwen was moping like a hen with the moult. The Vicar has been, but had only time to have a cup of tea, and go to an appointment."

"I'm sorry to be late," said Joe. "My horse cast a shoe, and I had first to hunt for a blacksmith, and when I found him I had nearly to hold him up to his work. He had bin on the booze for a fortneet, and had washed all his brains into his stomach. But here is a little present for you and the missus," and he presented two small silver teaspoons. "They are like me," he said—"small, but the genuine article."

"Thank you very much," said Rufus; "but there is a mystery we have bin waiting for you to fathom. Look at all those presents on the sideboard."

"My!" exclaimed Joe, going and looking critically at the articles he had himself purchased. "I wish I'd got married. Lydia, what do you say if we hitch up and have a silver wedding day next week?"

"It can't be done," said the housekeeper. "Besides,

it is not customary to make offers of matrimony in company."

"Well, I didn't know. I thought perhaps witnesses were necessary. But what is the mystery?"

"Why," said Rufus, "that silver coffee set purports to come from the Vicar; and that silverbacked hair-brush and comb from Miss Davies, and neither of them know anything about them."

"Dunno believe them," said Joe. "They are havin' you on. If it wonno them, who could it be?"

"That's what we want to find out," replied Rufus. "Sure you know nothin' about them?"

"I brought my present wi' me," replied Joe. "Lydia looks as if she knows, only she wunno tell. You ask her and Gwen. It looks like a woman's foolish trick."

"Indeed, no," replied Miss Davies. "Like you, I brought my present with me."

"Well, whoever it was, they had more money than sense. Now let me have some tea—blackish-brown and white at the top. I'm in splendid trim. Rufe, I'm glad you got married, but what Lucy ever saw in you is always a puzzle to me. She didna marry you for your beauty, nor for your money, nor for your manners; for you ha' none of these. It must ha' bin out of pity. If our Rufe dies," he continued, addressing Mrs. Wentworth, "remember, I'm to ha' the first offer. We con bury him and get married the same day; and then the same coaches will do both jobs and save expense."

CHAPTER III.

THE RED ACRES AND ITS SERVANTS.

"If ever one of my servants wants to be boss, I tell him the place is filled by a better man, and there wonno be a vacancy if I can help it for a long time to come."—J.W.

JOE WENTWORTH said one day to his brother, that at the Red Acres they had the best hosses, the best housekeeper, and the best tempered boss in the county.

"I think you are reet about the hosses, and the housekeeper, but I'm not prepared reet away to subscribe to the last. If it is so it would be more seemly if you left somebody else to say so."

"Nobody knows it so well as I do," was the reply. "It's only my modesty that has kept me from saying so before. I took warning from you, Rufe, and thinking it would be a variety to have one good tempered member of the family, I cultivated amiability until it oozes out of the hair of my head."

"Well," replied Rufus, "I heard a preacher say one day that every man was either a scarecrow or an example; and it appears I am the former and you the latter, according to your estimate of things. But I am glad you are so well suited with a housekeeper. A good housekeeper is the next best thing to a good wife."

"She's a jolly sight better," replied Joe. "You con read the alphabet backwards to a housekeeper

if anything goes wrong, but try it wi' a wife and you'll stop when you get to the letter 'O.' You con give orders to a housekeeper, but from a wife you receive them. You con send a housekeeper packin' about her business if you grow tired of her, but a wife sticks to you till you are ready for a wooden suit, and likely as not has already bin casting her mind round the likely bachelors and widowers in the neighbourhood to see who is to be the next victim."

"All stuff and nonsense," rejoined Rufus. "But it binna any use wastin' breath on trying to convince one who is determined not to be convinced. I have Solomon on my side, for he said, 'He that findeth a wife findeth a good thing.'"

"Well," Joe drily remarked, "if experience counts for anything he *ought* to know. If what you say is true, then Salt Lake City should be more like Heaven than any other city under the sun, but I can bear witness it binna. Of all the poor, dejected lookin' mortals, commend me to a Mormon elder. If I had to chose between takin' a dose of prussic acid and bein' the head of a Mormon family I'd go straight to the chemist and buy the acid."

"Oh, well," replied Rufus, "I dunna advise a dozen wives, but one good, sensible woman, whom you love and who loves you; that makes the ideal home, to my mind."

"I once heard a chap say 'wives be like pilchards; when they be bad, they be bad sartin, and when they be good, they only be middlin'; and I reckon he wonno far from the mark."

"I dunno believe it," replied Rufus. "There may be a few sour apples in an orchard, but mostly you'll find good, wholesome fruit."

"Well," replied Joe, "I mon be goin'. While the master stands, the hoss starves. The wurst of a farm is that if you bin away for ten minutes something is sure to go wrong. Thank your *stars*, Rufe, that you binna on a farm, or you'd be worried out of your life. I shall soon be as thin as a tinker's dog, which is nothing but a head and a tail, and a bark between."

"If nobody has any more to worry about than you," said Rufus, "the world would be full of happy folks. You're a prosperous farmer, wi' a lot of good servants, a first-rate housekeeper, and I should think are making money at the rate of a thousand a year."

"Measuring my corn by your bushel, binna you? A thousand a year! How could I make a thousand a year wi'oot robbin' somebody? What wi' wages, and rates, and taxes, and tithes, and rent, directly I make half-a-crown, two and fivepence three farthings is bespoke. And then you, or the Vicar, comes along and wants a donation either to buy a Methodist parson a perambulator, or a curate a chest protector, and I'm so good natured I never con refuse either of you. I'm determined to give up goin' to Church and Chapel, and save my money instead."

"Did you never hear of the man John Bunyan sang about " asked Rufus:—

"There was a man, some did count him mad;
The more he gave away, the more he had."

"There was a trick about that I'd like to learn," said Joe. "I guess he was like a chap I knew in America, who always put a dime on the collection plate and took a dollar off. Ta, ta! Now Briton," he continued, addressing his horse, "turn your tail towards Rufe and your head towards Lydia, and see how long it will take you to go from one to the other."

The master of the Red Acres had every reason to be proud, not only of his farm but of his servants. There was not one of them but in their own way admired their eccentric master, who fed them well, worked them hard, paid them better than anyone else would have done, and was constantly joking either with one or the other.

Miss Davies, his housekeeper, was in every way efficient and capable. Her incoming to the Red Acres had worked a revolution, and even the master himself had been compelled to yield to her firm but genial sway. She would tolerate no untidiness, and all the servants had learned that slipshod methods would no wise pass muster with her.

"She sings by the hour and smiles by the yard," said her master; "but she has a tongue which would raise a blister if she let herself go."

He frequently tried to aggravate her by doing, or saying, things he knew would upset her, but having once come to understand him, she never would give him the gratification of making her angry. All the maids in the house admired her, and it was very seldom she had any difficulty with any of them.

The men servants had been carefully chosen, and the principle ones, at least, were specialists in their own line.

Once, when a ploughman had applied for a situation, Joe had accompanied him to a twenty-acre field and bade him plough a furrow straight across.

"Well, I allow you can plough some," he said. "That furrow is nearly as straight as a calf's leg, and a bit straighter than a lawyer's conscience. It's rather ornamental to have a curve here and there, but I like straight lines myself."

"Better do it yourself, master, if you are not satis-

fied," replied the man; "I've done my best, and it will take some beating."

"A blind man couldna do much better, I'll allow," replied Joe. "But I've seen better ploughing by a lad of fourteen. Let me have hold of the handles. I've done no ploughing for a good many years, but if I couldna do better than that I'd give up and try to get an honest living by picking pockets. Gee!"

Straight as an arrow he guided the plough twice across the field. "There!" he said, when he got back, "I didna think I could do it so well, but I'm glad I hanno forgotten the way. I shall have to give myself a rise in wages, but wi' a bit o' practice thou'll make a ploughman, if thou doesn't imitate thine own legs, which seem to be trying to get away from one another. But it's an expert we want, so you'd better go and practise somewhere else, and come back in a couple of years, and I'll see if you ha' improved any."

"A bad master never made a good servant," Joe would sometimes say to his fellow farmers, when they complained about their servants. "I hanno got a dawdler about my place. The only man who is allowed to eat more than he earns is the boss. I've done my share of work if I never do another stroke."

"Wentworth can put us all right," replied a pert young farmer named Fisher. "His trumpeter is dead, and he has taken on the job himself."

"That's reet, Bob; and havin' taken it on I do it well, which is more than you can say about anything but eatin' and sleepin'."

Joe endeavoured to instil into the minds of his underlings the same desire which dominated his own mind—the desire to make the Red Acres the best farm in the country—and to a great degree he succeeded. John, the cowman was thoroughly trust-

worthy, and thought more of his work than his pay. The villagers set their clocks to the time John went to the farm, but never to the time he returned home.

"Bill," the waggoner, was a steady-going "come-day-go-day" man, thoroughly reliable, with a great love for his team of well-fed, well-groomed horses, of which he was as proud as his master was of his racers and hunters. He never hurried them, but he got out of them an enormous amount of work. Bill had a capacity for silence that was amazing, and a bucolic gift of humour all his own.

"Every time you speak you lose a chop," he would say to some loquacious youngsters, when they wished him to talk at meal times. His knowledge of experimental farming was very considerable, and Joe was always ready to give heed to his opinion. He was a tall, good-looking fellow, good-natured and good-tempered, but very slow and methodical, a fact which often brought him under the scathing tongue of his master.

"If there was an earthquake, and the Red Acres was swallowed up, Bill would be found somewhere down in Australia rubbing the brasses on the harness up," he once said.

Jokes, sarcasm, and even direct invectives, passed over him like water over a duck's back. "The master is a rum 'un," was ever his explanation of any outburst on Joe's part, and in that general statement he seemed to find unfailing consolation. At least a dozen times he had received his notice to quit, but neither master nor man ever intended these to be taken seriously, and they generally ended in a rise of wages or a gift of farm produce.

"Bill," asked his master one day, when he saw

him going in his slow, deliberate way to yoke a pair of horses in a waggon, "did you ever sweat?"

"Once or twice, master; but I dunno like it."

"I was going to warn you it is dangerous. A good remedy is to keep your hands in your pockets and breathe through your nose."

"I'll try it, master, if I ever feel it coming on," said Bill.

"I suppose it will take you a couple of hours to lace up your boots in a morning, dunno it?"

"I never timed it. You see, I dunno leave 'em till the morning—I start the neet before," and Bill's face screwed itself into a smile.

"Good plan, that," replied Joe drily. "I should think if you wanted to kiss your wife you begin to get your mouth in order a week before. However did you manage to get to church in time the mornin' you were married? I'd wager a diamond ring to an egg shell both your wife and the parson had to wait for you."

"Nay, you're wrong, guv'nor. She didna wait. She came and fetched me."

The relationship that existed between the two was greatly eased by this atmosphere of chaff and banter, and Bill always enjoyed an encounter with his master, relating to his wife at eventide how he had given the master a "twister," or, as in other circles in society they would say, "given him a Roland for his Oliver."

Sam, the head of the stables was as proud of his position as any Sultan that ever sat upon the throne of Persia. He was an autocrat in his own domain, and in his way was as much a character as his master. He had a shrewd wit, and often the two had encounters in which the Master did not always come

off victor. His love of horses was the great passion of his life, and he sometimes boasted that he could ride anything that had four legs. There were certain limits, however, that in his own realm even he was not permitted to go beyond. Once Joe caught him administering sundry cuffs on some of the stable boys, "but keep your hands off them. I'm the only one on this farm that is allowed to do any thrashin', and as I dinna like to be partial when I begin, I shall go from top to bottom."

"But he was cheeky, master, and wouldna do as I wanted him."

"Cheeky, was he? Well, that comes of copying his betters. But we monno ha' any disobedience here. Now, Lach, why didna you do as you were told?"

"Please, sir, he called me names; and said if I didna hurry he'd knock my head off and make me eat it."

"Clever trick that would be. I shall have to get him to show me how it's done. But it seems to me there ha' been faults on both sides; as the man said when he'd a wooden leg on one side and a club foot on the other. Remember, my lad, you're here to learn, and the way to learn is to obey, and Sam wonno forget that though he is boss of the stables, I'm boss of the boss."

Truth to tell, Sam did not even *try* to contest the position. To him Joe's word was law, and if he demanded the same implicit obedience inside the stables it must be granted that it tended to efficiency, and no stables were kept with more scrupulous care for cleanliness and ventilation and all that made for the health and comfort of its inmates than those at the Red Acres. Everything moved with the regularity and exactness of clockwork. Sam had twenty lads

and men of varying ages under him, and all in all it was creditable to him that seldom was there any friction or dissatisfaction.

Sam, who for years, like his master, remained a bachelor, suddenly succumbed to the charms of one of the servants in the house; a good, godly woman, who married him in a fit of heartache. Susan kept him in dutiful subjection, refusing him permission to spend three nights a week at the "Red Lion," as he had done before telling the yokels apocryphal tales about Joe and his wonderful hosses, grinning to himself all the time at the unquestioning acceptance of many "facts" which had their birth in his own imagination. The result was that quite a halo of wonder and romance gathered around the Red Acres, apart from that which legitimately belonged to it. It was the ambition of nearly every lad in the village to get into the stables of "Mister Wentworth," and for every vacancy there was at least a score of applicants.

"No swearing, no smoking, and no drinking," were the trinity of prohibitions insisted upon by the boss, while the positive conditions were cleanliness, smartness, and obedience. All in all it was no bad training school, and parents were eager to get their boys under Mister Wentworth.

Of the other servants it is not necessary to write particularly. It is sufficient to say that the spirit of the master seemed to be contagious and that generally speaking, in the house and stables alike, there was an atmosphere of breezy goodwill and genial good humour and laughter. The stable lads were apt to carry their jokes too far at times and to get into trouble with Sam in consequence, as when three times in one night, in midwinter, he was knocked up

under pretence that a horse was sick and dying, only to find that he had been duped each time; but whenever there was trouble and Joe was called in to arbitrate, he always gave the verdict against them with a suitable admonition, and afterwards distributed shillings amongst them. All in all there was more merriment and fun at the Red Acres than at any other farm, and a lad or man was counted fortunate if he got a situation under Joe Wentworth.

CHAPTER IV.

MISS DAVIES' LOVER.

"Love is like the measles, easiest cured when it comes out in a rash."—J. W.

A YOUNG farmer named Venables, who lived at a farm called "The Three Ashes," some two miles from the Red Acres, suddenly began to make frequent visits to Joe's farm. It was soon evident that though his visits were ostensibly to see the master, there were ulterior and more powerful motives in operation. The fact was he had fallen hopelessly in love with the housekeeper, who, however, showed no signs of returning his affections. But these attentions laid her open to a good deal of kindly banter from Joe, who seemed to delight in it all.

"Seems to me," he said, "Dan Venables has taken a tremendous liking for my company. Guess he's got a card up his sleeve somewhere. Expects me to remember him in my will, maybe; or else he is mooching round to see whether the Red Acres is a payin' investment, and intends to overbid me when my lease runs out. Cannot think of anythin' else which con bring him here so often—eh, miss?"

"You forget the charm of your own conversation," she replied. "The last time he was here you talked for two hours on prize potatoes and the superior quality of Berkshire hogs. It was very interesting and entertaining."

"It is very kind of you to say so. I choose the subject to suit the intellect of my company; I always do. Besides, bacon and potatoes go well together."

"You cannot wonder, then, that Mr. Dan should be charmed, and want to come frequently. For my own part, I find his company just a little trying."

"Sits and sighs and stares; and sighs and stares again, dunno he? Dan is a good second-rate farmer, but he's the champion sigher that I've ever come across. You con hear one of them sighs comin' directly it starts out of his feet, and by the time it reaches his head it has gained such volume that it's like a blast of a nor'-easter on a wintry night at sea; and it is so strange, those sighs come faster and more furious when you are in the room. When you are absent he has hard work to raise a sigh at all."

"Then I think I had better stop out altogether," she replied.

"That would be to punish me for his sake, which wouldna be fair. I enjoy your presence as much as pancakes and honey. It makes the place feel home-like."

"That's one of the nicest things you have ever said," she rejoined.

"It binna half what I could say, if I tried!" he said. "But I'm not going to try. When I do tell fibs, I try and make 'em as small as I con to start wi'; I know they'll grow bigger of their own accord."

"Now you've spoilt it," she retorted. "I thought it was unlike you to pay anybody a compliment if there was not a sting in it somewhere. I'm not going to let you withdraw what you said, but believe that you really spoke your real feeling just now."

"That's very sensible. Always believe the best, and prepare for the worst. Reminds me of once when

I was on the *Elmira*. There was a group of four passengers who were about as wicked a lot as ever played cards on Sunday. We struck a big storm in mid-Atlantic, and the ship, nothing to brag about in the best of weather, sprang a leak, and when we had bin pumping for an hour the water was gaining on us. The captain was a decent sort, but he was too religious for the crowd he had on board. When they reported that the ship was sinking not a muscle of his face moved. Those four chaps had faces as white as if they had seen a ghost apiece and one extra. One of them said to the captain, 'You don't say she is sinking, do you?' 'Well,' said he, 'you must prepare for the worst and hope for the best. My opinion is, you'll be in the water in another twenty minutes; but you fellows needn't worry, for if I make no mistake, you'll not be long before you'll be in a place where there is plenty of fire to dry your clothes.' We were picked up a bit later; but in two days those fellows were swearing and gambling as bad as ever."

One morning, Joe was going to market, but Miss Davies was too busy to accompany him, as she frequently did. "Good-bye, miss," he said. "If I get drunk to-day there wunno be anybody to bring me home. Dunno worry if I'm late; and if Dan Venables calls tell him not to waste any of his sighs till I get back. I like to count how many he con crowd into ten minutes. I expect he'll call to ax you to lend his sister a couple of hairpins, or maybe to sell him a postage stamp. The last time he called it was a recipe for elderberry wine he wanted. I always ax him what he has come for. It is so interesting to watch his face when he is trying to refresh his memory about the purpose of his journey."

The object of all these remarks was a fine young

fellow of quite average ability, and who was the leading bass singer in the church choir. That he was desperately in love with Miss Davies was apparent to everybody, and now he did not try to hide it. Instead of being discouraged by the cool reception he received, he was secretly encouraged thereto by Joe Wentworth, though it was the last thing the farmer desired or expected that anything serious would come of it.

"You hanno bin up to our place lately, Dan," he said, when he met him at the market. "It was Sunday, wunno it? That's four days ago. Love is like porridge; it soon grows cold. You should hit the iron while it is hot, and keepin' hitting it till you haven't a hair left on your head rather than be beaten."

"She does not give me much encouragement, Mr. Wentworth."

"A shy hoss has often bin caught. Maybe she is only tantalising you a bit. It's a way women have. They often say 'No' when they mean 'Yes'; but mind you this, Dan, you're not her equal by a long way, either for brains or beauty. She is the top pear on the tree in womanhood for many miles round."

"I am quite aware of that, Mr. Wentworth. I'm no way worthy of her. Nobody is more conscious of it than I."

"Glad to hear it," replied the farmer. "Compared to her, you are nothing but a frozen turnip alongside a prize peach; or a North American mule compared with an Arab; but you'll improve, if you dunno take to drink or gambling, and you try hard. I once knew a train greaser in America who became a big bug in Wall Street. It's true he's in prison just now, but that's an accident. He tried to worst a bigger bug, and he went under. So there's no tellin' what you

may become if you only try hard and 'keep in virtue's way,' as the hymn says; and if you don't manage it, take good care to make folks believe you do, which is the same thing so far as this world is concerned; but, if our Rufe is to be trusted, makes a wonderful difference in the next. Come up to-neet, and I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll leave you alone for half an hour, and if you conno come to a settlement in that time, in my opinion you never will."

"Thank you, Mr. Wentworth, ever so much. It is very good of you."

"Oh, I always like to help a lame dog over a stile. I might be taken that way myself some day, and need a bit of a lift. If I do, I'll come to you. But mind, there mon be nothin' half-hearted about this business. I hope you bin in earnest, Dan."

"I certainly am, sir."

"Well, if you feel that you mon have Miss Davies or that life will be like a blown egg, wi' a hole at each end so big that there binna any shell left, and that the only thing worth thinkin' about is the quickest way to get where Methuselah went when he was smitten down in his youth, not bein' permitted even to live till he was a thousand years of age; my advice is get through wi' it, whether it ends in marriage or despair. You mon go down on your knees to it and ha' tears in your eyes, and tremble all over, like a leaf on a poplar tree in a gale. If you conno manage the real thing, put a peeled onion in your pocket and get a good sniff at it when nobody is lookin'. You see, I know all the tricks as well as if I'd gone through it myself."

When Dan presented himself that evening at the Red Acres, he was considerably taken aback on being shown into the parlour, where Joe and Miss Davies

had just finished tea, to be greeted with, "Hallo, Dan, and what's up this time? Got an old hen down wi' the pip, or a calf that's got rheumatics in its toes at the Three Ashes, eh? What con we do for you?"

The young farmer stood on the threshold, turning his hat round and round, and looking into it, as though he had some hope of finding an excuse somewhere in the folds of the lining, and at last stammered out something about being a fine night, he thought he would have a walk over.

"Lydia," said Joe, looking across with a mischievous smile playing about the corners of his mouth, "it's my belief that Dan is o'er head and ears in love, only he hanno the courage to say so. I know the symptoms, because I've had 'em more than once myself. I wish you'd ha' pity and take him to see the Vicar, and get the day fixed. In the meantime, you might ax him to ha' a cup of tea and that bit of pork pie that was left; it will help to soothe his nerves; and while you two settle it I'll go and do a few jobs in the stables that need attention." Having, as he afterwards said, "cleared the pitch," he went off chuckling.

In a quarter of an hour a very dejected-looking young fellow left the Red Acres. As Joe watched him going, he said, "My! Lydia has soon cooked his goose! He binna whistlin' 'See, the conquerin' hero comes.' He's feeling sorry for himself, no doubt; but he'll get o'er it. I guess he dunno come again to the Red Acres in a hurry to borrow a tin tack, or to keep us posted up in the kind of weather we shall be having."

"Well, Miss Davies," he said, when he entered the house, "when is the happy event to take place? You

see, I shall want to order a white waistcoat and a pair of patent leather boots in honour of the occasion."

"You need not bother," she replied. "There will be no event, so far as I'm concerned. I'm going to stop here to tease you."

"Well, I'll try and put up wi' it a bit longer. But I think I had better send Sam and Jim after poor Dan, lest he commits suicide on the way home. He was looking as bad as a hoss wi' a broken leg when he left. I thought, maybe, you had accepted him, and he was repentin' already."

"You need not trouble. Dan is too sensible to do anything of the kind. He will get over it in a fortnight, and then marry some good girl, with plenty of commonsense, who will make him a far better wife than I should ever do."

"I daresay you're reet. Anyhow, you know your own weight better than anybody else. But you might do wuss than take Dan. He counts twelve to the dozen, and that's not what ye con say of all the young men of to-day. And he's got a good bass voice, which would have bin useful in singing the babies to sleep when they got a pain in their tummies."

"Now you are talking sheer nonsense, and I shall leave you. I think I shall go to Summerton and see Gwen."

"Aye, to show her you've got another scalp on your belt. Between you, there wonno be a young fellow in the neighbourhood just now who hanno either broken his heart or got a bit chipped out by one or other of you. If you see Rufe, tell him I heard a man say at the market the other day that the last sermon he preached was like a badly-baked loaf, burnt on the outside and doughy inside. I like to encourage him whenever I get a chance."

"You are too bad. If I were your brother I would not put up with your teasing. He is a man in ten thousand to take it with such good temper. I like his preaching far better than I do your joking. The one is always in good taste, which can seldom be said of the other."

"I conno help it," replied Joe. "The one thing I have good taste in is the selection of my housekeepers. Dunno hurry home. You con stop and ha' your supper at Rufe's expense, and I'll put that new hoss in the trap and fetch you home. If I dunno gi' him a run out he'll be jumping out of the hoss box. But he has got splendid action; he steps out like a German captain doin' the goose step. That is, if you binna freetened," he added.

"I am never frightened when you are driving," she replied.

"After that," he said, "I'm glad you binna goin' to be Mrs. Venables. I mon buy you a new pair of gloves when I go to Whitehurst—if they dunno cost more than fourpence-ha'penny."

CHAPTER V.

EGGS.

"The devil's a fool, but the pity is that many folks hanno found him out."—J. W.

"MASTER, I feel certain there is somebody stealing our eggs," said Miss Davies one evening.

"Stealing eggs?" rejoined Joe. "I hope not. What makes you think so?"

"Well, we have at least a score more hens than we had last summer, and yet we are not getting so many eggs."

"Perhaps they have got up a trade union among 'em and have adopted a policy of 'ca' canny,'" rejoined Joe. "I heard of somethin' of the sort among some trade unionists somewhere in Wales. Seemed to me to be a kind of anti-sweat society, the main principles of which are, 'Do as little work as possible, and get as much for it as you can.' I dunno like to think we ha' anybody about the place that binna honest."

"Neither do I; but I am forced to the conclusion that it must be so. I found a nest yesterday in one corner of the stackyard. There were nine eggs in it. My hands were full at the time, and so I left them until this morning. When I went to gather them there were only two."

"Well, they hanno had time to hatch into chickens, anyhow," said Joe. "We mon keep our eyes open, now we know."

A few evenings later, when the dinner bell rang, instead of going into the house, Joe lingered about the buildings, when he saw a man named Pearson, whose work it was to look after the cows, picking up something out of the hedge bottom and putting it into his pocket. Although he was several hundred yards away, the gleam of white caught Joe's eye, and he was certain he had discovered the egg thief. Keeping out of sight, he watched him going along the hedge bottom, and, by-and-by, he came to where the hen houses were, and after carefully looking round, he entered and remained a few minutes, and then emerged with his pockets bulging very suspiciously. He then started homewards. The farmer slipped round and met him at the gate.

"Oh, Pearson," he said, "is that you? I thought you had gone home by this time?"

"No, sir; but I'm going. I had a little job to do, and I thought I might as well finish to-neet as leave it till to-morrow."

"Reet, Pearson—perfectly reet! I like to see a mon so devoted to his work that he dunno run away directly the clock makes the hour for leavin'. I've known chaps before now ha' their coats on, and their hands and faces washed, all ready for a sprint directly the time was up. But as you're so fond of work, Pearson, perhaps you wouldna mind doin' just a little more. Sam was to get a few bundles of fodder down from the loft over the stable, but he has either forgotten or has had a fit to 'do it to-morrow,' and left it. I wish, if you dunno mind, you would go up and throw three or four bundles down."

Joe knew well enough that the trap-door leading into the loft was so narrow that it took a man all his time to squeeze through, and that lifting bundles of

hay and throwing them through a loft window was no easy matter for a man with his pockets full of eggs.

"Certainly, master," replied Pearson, affecting an alacrity he by no means felt.

The two walked back to the stables together, Joe talking about the fine weather and the promise for the harvest, and Pearson trying to think how he should manage to get out of a rather tight corner without arousing suspicion.

When they got inside the stable, he said, "I think I will take my coat off. It binna easy to get through that trap door; besides; it is very warm in the loft."

"So it is," replied Joe. "Do as you like, Pearson. Besides, I always like to see a man with his coat off when he is working."

The man took off his coat and hung it on a nail where it was not easily seen, and where he had good reason to hope the bulkiness of the pockets would escape the observation of his master. With a quiet smile he began to climb the ladder, and with difficulty wriggled through the trap door. Directly he had disappeared, Joe got two large stones, and having first given the pockets a blow with his fist, dropped one of the stones in each of them. Needless to say, every egg was smashed. Then he quietly waited for the man to come down.

"Thank you, Pearson," he said. "Now you con go home. I mon ask Miss Davies to send a few eggs around for the wife some of these days, though she tells me the hens are laying badly just now. Got a kind of lazy fit on. I expect it's the fault of those fellows in Parliament talkin' about a Daylight Savings Bill. They think they needn't hurry, as they will have plenty of time."

Turn out your pockets.

Face page 47.

The man had gone and taken his coat down from the nail, and nearly dropped it, the weight was so heavy. He couldn't make it out. He was confident it felt heavier than when he took it off. However, slowly he managed to get inside it. By this time the fluid of the eggs was oozing through the cloth and dropping down on the floor.

"Good night, Pearson," said Joe, as they went out, and he locked the door of the stable. "But, my dear fellow!" he exclaimed, "what is the matter wi' you? There's something running out of your pockets. It looks like gum. You hanno got a bottle of gum on you, ha' you?"

"No, sir," replied the man, now at his wit's end; "I dunno know what it is."

"Well, empty your pockets. Turn 'em inside out. You conno go home leaking all the way. It binna gum," said Joe, as he put forth a finger and caught a drop of the sticky mess and smelt it. "I do declare, it's egg! You must ha' put your jacket down and an old hen took a fancy to it and laid an egg in the pocket. But she couldna ha' laid one in both pockets, when I come to think of it. It's queer! Turn out your pockets, man!"

Pearson did so, pulling out the two big stones first of all.

"Well, I do declare!" exclaimed Joe. "Those hens must ha' had a turn for religion, and bin trying to lay foundation stones for a new chapel. I mon tell Rufe about this. It is true they are not very big ones, but they are not at all bad for a first attempt. But I mon be going in to supper now, or the housekeeper will be callin' me over the coals. Good neet, Pearson; we mon try to find out the hen that ha' served you that trick to-morrow."

Joe then left him, and went into the house, chuckling to himself. "Missie," he exclaimed, "I've found out the reason for the shortage of eggs. The hens are so clever they lay inside jacket pockets, and not content wi' that, when they make a very special effort they lay foundation stones." He then proceeded to tell the story with great glee and such humour that Miss Davies fairly ached with laughter.

"What shall you do with him?" she asked at length. "Dismiss him, I suppose?"

"Well, it's your department, miss, upon which the loss has come. What do you advise?"

"He has an ailing wife and several little children," she replied. "He certainly deserves to be punished, but there is his family to consider. I think you might forgive him this time, but warn him if it occurs again he will have to go."

"I've already said this is your funeral and not mine. I shall send him to you in the morning and you must be content."

The next morning a very dejected-looking man left the Red Acres. Pearson had had his interview with the housekeeper, and she had got the information from him that he was stealing eggs for his sick wife. He admitted with tears in his eyes that he had done wrong, and promised that if Mr. Wentworth would overlook it this time he would never do such a thing again.

She talked to him seriously, and promised to call and see his wife, and then let him go. When Joe heard the story, he immediately put money into the hands of Miss Davies to spend on the necessary articles for Pearson's wife and never once did he allude to what had taken place, and in a week or two raised the man's wages.

"Eggs come in all reet now?" he asked Miss Davies a month or two later.

"Oh, yes; there has been a great improvement," she replied.

"Well," he said, "Pearson goes about as though he daren't look a hen in the face. I believe if he saw one coming he'd run away. You must have rubbed it in pretty thick. It freetens me lest you should go for me some time."

"When you take to stealing eggs I will," she replied.

"Nay. When I steal something, it wonno be an egg or the hen, but the woman who feeds 'em."

"Pooh!" she replied. "The woman might object. Besides, I don't think you have courage enough."

CHAPTER VI.

A FERTILE BRAIN.

"Ideas are like flies. Set two off buzzing and you'll soon have a swarm."—J. W.

TO Joe Wentworth the credit was due of inaugurating the first flower show in Summerton. It became an annual event of great interest to the simple-minded villagers; indeed, the gala day of the year. As he said, "You never can tell how one thing will lead to another. Ideas breed as quickly as flies—at least, in the reet sort of head; but never measure a man by the size of his head. I once knew a man who had to have his hats specially made for him, his head was so big; but it might as weel ha' bin a vegetable marrow or a pumpkin. It binna size, it's quality that tells."

His own head was certainly fertile in ideas, and some of them at least were productive of much good to the community. It was some weeks after the first show that he said to his brother, "I say, Rufe, I've done a spell of thinking; I'm taken that way sometimes, and when I am something happens. I have been suffering from boils on the neck. If you've never had boils on an active part of your anatomy there binna much credit in bein' religious. If you had to keep your head in one place, and dare not turn it even if a dog is biting your leg, you would know what it was to suffer wi' your mouth shut. Well, I sat pitying myself, which is just the most foolish thing any man can do, and I made up my mind that I must turn my attention to something else.

or I should soon be as soft as a boiled turnip, and have no more real backbone than a feather bed. And so I thought about hosses, and they are grand things to fill your thoughts wi', up to the point when there is no more you can think about, and then I thought about all the fellows I had taken in; and that lasted me two days and three neets, and then I had no more to think about. I've got, as you know, a housekeeper in a thousand. She's better than whipped cream on raspberry cake; and so at neets, when her work was done, she sat and read to me out of the newspaper, or maybe, out of a book. One neet she read about a fellow who made a fortune growing herbs. He was a miner who got hurt in the pit, and he couldna hew coals. He had a bit of a garden, about as big as a tidy sized pocket-handkerchief. I like a fellow like that. He's got grit in him and gumption, which are two of the best words beginning with G in the English language, or any other for that matter. He started to grow herbs and sell 'em. And his business flourished, and he got another piece of land as big as another pocket-handkerchief, and he went on until he got nearly half an acre under herbs, and then his fortune grew with the output. 'Well,' I said to Lydia, 'a fellow that con grow a fortune out of sage and marjoram hanno got his wits tied up in a rag and hung in the chimney corner to dry.' So I worked it out. There is owd Rider. He's got a garden, but he hanno made a fortune, and I dunno wonder. Nearly every cottager about here has got a garden, but they dunno seem to ha' struck a gold mine, any of 'em; or if they have they are keepin' it mighty quiet. And I began to see that there are two things that kill the cottager —rent and want of knowledge. He dinna know

how to do things. It binna that he's idle, and it binna that he dunno want to do things, but that he dunno know how to go about it. Rufe, you struck oil when you took to growing roses; but then it binna a big bunion you've got on your shoulders. Our family went out of fools before you came into the world, and there hanno bin any born since. Our owd dad had brains, but he didna give 'em a chance. He kept them soaked in ale. And our mother—bless her!—if she hadna had more sharpness and commonsense than half the wimmen in the parish, you and I would have starved. You got her religion, and I've got her commonsense. You inherited her tongue, and I've got her beauty. You've her love of work, and I've her good temper. So that neither of us has any reason to complain or be jealous. What these folks about here need is somebody to tell 'em how to make the best of what they've got. Now, how's it to be done? I've done my share of thinking. You mon do the rest."

"Well, Joe," said Rufus, "I'll not say but what you've hit on a subject that is worth following up. There is money in ideas. The mistake most folks make is they are looking for money outside when they should look for it inside. The best money-making machine is under a man's own hat, if he will only work it and keep it right."

"You are reet there, Rufe. There's hundreds of men use their hands and feet a lot more than they have any need, if they would only use their brains a little more. The Red Acres binna the best farm in the parish, but it's going to be. When I took it, the only crop worth gatherin' was stones. But it's improvin'. I hanno made a fortune out of it, and I dunno think I ever shall; but I hanno lost one,

and that's summat to brag about, for it has ruined more than one before me. But I didna sit on a gate whistling when I was wanted in the harvest field, and I didna lie in bed looking at the flies on the ceiling when I ought to ha' bin looking for thistles in my corn fields. There are some men who hanno got any more stamina than an empty sack. It's useless wastin' time and temper in trying to make it stand up. You've got to howd it, or fill it, or hang it. The fust is the most effectual way wi' sacks, and the last wi' men. Couldna you gi' these fowks a few hints? Suppose you got 'em to come to the schoolroom some neet, and instead o' spending your time telling 'em about the Syrian general, Naaman, and his leprosy—as you did the last time I heard you—you towd them about how to grow onions, carrots, and potatoes for the market. Dunno you think it would be time well spent?"

"I couldna," replied Rufus, "because I dunno know much more about them than they do themselves. Now, if it was roses—grafting, and binding, and planting—well, I could; but that wouldna be any use, I fear."

"No," replied Joe. "It's not the ornamental we want, it's the useful. You spend a heap o' time preachin' teetotalism, Rufe, and though I've never signed on, I agree that anything is better for a poor man than havin' nothin' else to do at neets but sit in a public house killin' time. It's hard work, and it takes a lot of drink to wash it down. But you preachers make the mistake of expecting a man, because he has a head on his shoulders, to think. I've got an old threshin' machine in the barn, but I don't use it. It has grown rusty, and it wants a deal of oiling and putting into gear before it could be made

to do any work. Well, it's that way wi' most men's thinking machines. They are out of repair and rusty. There are some folks higher up in society who dunno do much thinkin', so they needna throw stones at the lower orders on that score; but the labourers have never had a chance. There's Swinnerton, Sir John's gardener at the Hall. He's a knowing chap, but he's a bit close, and wunna tell any more than he can help. There are men as miserly about givin' information as others are about givin' money. But he might be got to gi' the men a talk about the reet stuff to grow, if he was paid for it. And as you are makin' money by the hatful, Rufe, I dunno see that you con spend it better than in payin' for the education of the people. I'd do it myself if I wonno so poor; but the next best thing to spending money reet is to tell other folks how to spend theirs."

"There is summat in what you say, Joe, except the last part—about your being poor. I'll believe that you are poor when I see your will, and not till then," replied Rufus.

"In any case there would be nothin' in it for you. I'd as soon think of takin' dogs to Constantinople as to leave money to you. If I've anythin' to leave, I shall leave it to a school to teach cats good manners at neet, and to ha' their full dress rehearsals in the daytime. You are the only relation I have that counts, and you only count nine with the tail cut off, and if you had a fortune left you, you might take to drink, so I wunno put temptation in your way."

"What about Gwen?" asked Rufus with a smile.

"She binna any relation of mine. I once heard you say that the angels left her in the wheelbarrow, in the garden where you found her. Well, if the angels are a branch of the family we hanno owned

the connection in my time, and I should want to know where they come from before I acknowledge any relationship. For there are different kinds of angels, and one cannot be too partickler who is admitted into the family. But do you think you could get hold of Swinnerton?"

"I might; but if I could not the Vicar could. He wouldna like to refuse anything to Mr. Bird."

"The very thing!" exclaimed Joe. "See the Vic., and put him on the track. But mind you dunno leave him to pay. I'd rather pay myself than let him. It's my belief that man gives away four-fifths of his salary and lives on the other fifth. He is always helpin' somebody."

"That's true," replied Rufus. "And he does it wi'oot any regard for sect or creed."

"That's what vexes me," said Joe. "I give my shillin' to the Poor Fund, expecting it will go to some fellow-Churchman, and I find instead it is being given to a measly Methodist. If a mon goes to chapel, I say let the chapel help him. That's commonsense."

"It's verra common sense, but it binna religion, and the Vicar knows it. Besides, if you saw anybody in want you would be the first to help him, no matter whether he was a Jew or a Gentile, a Churchman or an atheist. You like to be aggravating, though. You're a much better man than you make yourself out to be."

"I wish I could return the compliment," replied Joe in his most provoking tone. "But you mon see the Vicar and tell him if he dunno do it I shall make a collection in the church and take the money myself."

As a result of this conversation, Rufus had an interview with the Vicar the same evening, and he immediately fell in with the project, and offered the

church schoolroom for the lectures free of cost. Swinnerton, after a little persuasion, agreed to give the lectures.

The bucolic mind, however, moves very slowly, and the attendance at the first of the lectures was distinctly disappointing. The Vicar took the chair, supported by Rufus and a few of the better class people of the village, but only two labourers and Billy Stroud, the half-wit, were present as representing the class for which they were specially designed. Joe ragged his brother unmercifully, as if the suggestion had come from Rufus rather than from himself.

"Not much of a success, this new lecturing business of yours, Rufus," he said. "You'll have to gi' it up and start a pie-making factory instead."

Three days later, Joe was passing the cottage where Billy Stroud lived, and he saw the half-wit busy at work in the garden making a shallow trench in which to grow peas.

"Hallo Billy!" he said. "What are you doing? Going to sow shillings and grow sovereigns, eh?"

"No, Mister Wentworth. I'm going to sow some peas—real good 'uns, too. Your brother gi' 'em to me."

"Humph!" rejoined Joe. "Let me look at 'em." He closely examined the peas, and then he said, "It's my opinion our Rufe has bin havin' you on. Those peas are far too hard. Look here, Billy, I'll tell you what to do, if you want a big crop and for 'em to grow quick. Just you take and boil those peas till they are soft, and then sow 'em while they are warm. But dunno tell anybody, or you'll not get the first peas in the village. But, mind, you monno say anything about my havin' put you up to this wrinkle. If our Rufe got to know he'd be fine an' angry wi' me,

for he always boils his peas before eatin' 'em. You ought to get first prize at the flower show."

Billy was not shrewd enought to notice the qualification, and he replied, "Thank you, Mister Wentworth; I will."

"That's reet, lad; and if the crop binna a good one, you con have as many peas from the Red Acres as you con eat. We've generally enough and to spare."

Billy did as he was told, and sat and chuckled and rubbed his hands in high glee at the thought of taking the first prize. To do him justice, Joe was a bit ashamed of himself for having perpetrated this joke on a man who was mentally deficient; but, as he said sometimes, the imp of mischief was busy in his brain that morning.

"Rufe, you wonno have a look in wi' green peas this year," Joe said to his brother. "Billy Stroud is in for the first prize, and he's dead gone on gettin' it."

"I'm glad to hear it," rejoined Rufe. "I'd like the poor chap to git something; for he hasna many compensations. It must be terrible to go about wi' a crazy mind."

"It all depends whether you and other folks have found it out. There are lots of idiots besides those in an asylum, only they hanno bin found out. The difference between bein' sane and bein' thought sane is a big 'un, only it dunno make any difference to the treatment you receive. But what do you think Billy is doing in order to get ahead of you?"

"I dunno know. Maybe he's gettin' some prize peas to sow."

"No," replied Joe. "He is boilin' his peas. He has an idea they will grow quicker if he softens them a bit."

"Now, come," exclaimed Rufus; "you are joking."

"It's as true as the Ten Commandments, and a lot truer than some of your sermons. You ax him."

The poor half-wit, however, like some people with more sense, could not keep a secret, and one night, with many nods and winks, he told one of his neighbours what he had done to secure the first prize. The news was received with roars of laughter, and was passed on to others, and soon the whole village was smiling over Billy and his peas.

In time, of course, Rufus got to hear how the joke had originated. After seeing the half-wit and giving him some more peas, persuading him with difficulty that his brother had only been joking, he got him to sow a second time. He then made his way to the Red Acres, and gave Joe what the latter designated "a dressin' down that took both hair and skin off."

"If I'd picked the parson's pocket," he said, "or stolen the silver candlesticks from off the Communion table in the church, he couldna have called me by any wuss names. There are times when Rufe conno see a joke any more than a blind man con see the point of a needle. I let him have his say, and when he had done I gave him a ride home behind a young hoss that I knew had an idea that it is a humiliation to run between two shafts. And the fun was on before we had got far, for he jumped and danced about, and kicked all he knew, and all the time I believe Rufe was kind of tryin' to recollect how many sins he had committed since he was of a responsible age. But I landed him safely, and we parted good friends. That's what I call heaping coals of fire on his head."

Joe made *amende honourable* to Billy, for, much to his delight, he gave him permission to catch rabbits on his farm, an occupation at which he proved himself an expert.

The farmer gave instructions to his men that they were not to interfere. "Any rabbit that lets Billy catch him dunno deserve to live," he said. But Billy displayed such skill and interest that the farmer suggested to him that he should take to mole catching, and bought him a number of traps to begin with. And so it came to pass that henceforth Billy was a useful member of society, and earned his bread before he ate it, which Wentworth declared "raised him above the level of lords and dukes and cadgers."

The lecturing scheme in a little while began to be popular, for Sir John Crookworth gave it his patronage, and took the chair, and also brought special lecturers to instruct the cottagers in bee keeping and fruit growing, with the result that Summerton became quite a model village. The public houses were no longer filled with loafers, and in three years after the scheme was started there was hardly a cottager but what had opened a small banking account, and cherished the hope of one day being able to buy his little holding.

"There is one fund that wunno be any use in this parish soon," said the farmer to his brother one day.

"What fund is that?" asked Rufus.

"The Poors Fund," was the reply. "It is fast coming that there will only be two folk in the village who will need help."

"That's a good job. But what two do you mean?"

"The Vicar and myself. He's as poor as old Job's donkey, and I'm no better. I'm always lookin' round the corner to see how far the workhouse is off."

"Joe, you should speak the truth," said Rufus severely.

"I always do," he replied, "except when I'm with you. Then I suit my conversation to my company."

CHAPTER VII.

JOE MAKES A PROPOSITION.

"A man dunno need to be a parson to pick up many a sermon in a garden."—J.W.

"MISS DAVIES, that kitchen garden grows more stuff than we want, dunno it?"

"Well, it would, if it was properly looked after, but I'm afraid it gets a bit neglected. Still, we've had more raspberries that we could use, and a good deal of rhubarb we gave away, and yet there was some wasted."

"Pity, that," said Joe. "My mother used to say, 'Waste not, want not,' though there wonno much fear of wastin' at our house. I remember once she stripped me to give me a bath in her washin' tub, and she cried because she could count my ribs. There was skin and bone, wi'oot as much fat as would have greased a cobbler's awl."

"I'm afraid you had a very hard schooling, Mr. Wentworth," said Miss Davies sympathetically.

"I'm not complaining," replied Joe. "Some get the fat end to begin wi', and the lean to finish off wi'; and some are lean to begin wi', and get the fat after;

and I prefer the latter. It's true some get all lean, and some get all fat; so if a man gets half-an'-half he hanno much reason to grumble. Do you know, I couldna tell at fourteen the difference between beef and mutton; but nobody hadna better presume on my ignorance in that department now? But wi' us it was pig flesh always, if any flesh at all; and the wonder is that we have not been gruntin' ever since. I con hardly look a pig in the face now wi'oot blushin', when I remember how many of the family I've helped to eat. That's the reason," he went on mendaciously, "I always tell Jim to feed the pigs on the best meal and plenty of it. It is kind of paying off an old debt." Here he sipped his tea and looked meditatively into the fire.

"How was it you were so poor?" asked Miss Davies. "Was your father dead?"

"Dead? No," he replied. "My dad had two faults: he didna like work and he did like drink. He'd walk thirty miles to escape a job rather than walk one to it. He'd a natural disinclination to perspiration. I believe he never sweat in his life but once, and that was one day when he was thrashing me for eatin' a pork and tatie pie my mother had put by for his supper. I'd had nowt to eat all day except a chunk o' bread and treacle in the mornin', and while mother was out working I found the pie and went for it all I knew how. I bargained for a thrashin' when I took it, but I didna bargain for bein' beaten black and blue. Though I wonno say it wasn't worth it. If I had to go through it again I think I should choose the pie."

"Poor little fellow!" exclaimed Miss Davies, her eyes filling sympathetically with tears.

"Nay, nay, lass, it binna a cryin' matter though my

mother cried herself to sleep that neet. I hadna reckoned on that, and it was the only thing that made me sorry I took it. That is one reason I dunno like to ha' anythin' about me that binna well fed. I wouldna starve a mouse. If I knew one was real hungry I'd let him have a good feed off the cheese and then set the cat on his track. It must be vexin' to die before your time, but it must be especially vexin' to die wi' an empty stomach. But past troubles are best buried. I daresay, all in all, I've had as good a time of it as most, and a good deal better than some. But about that garden! I've bin thinkin' that as it will grow more stuff than we want, and we binna making the best of it, of lettin' a part of it to somebody else. What do you think to that?"

"I shouldn't," she replied most emphatically. "I think it would pay if you would allow John to spend more time in it. Indeed, I am sure it would. I did a little myself to the strawberry beds and we had a fine crop, and what we don't need we can sell."

"Well," he replied, "there is sense in what you say, but all the men have about as much to do as they con get through, and especially John. He's a handy man, and there binna much about a farm he conno do, from puttin' a ring in a pig's nose to eating five mutton chops and then be ready to begin his dinner; and so everybody wants him. Gardenin' binna his strong point, but he dunno do amiss at that. The only thing John conno do is to control his wife's tongue, for she talks nineteen to the dozen, mostly sheer nonsense and scandal. She is about half his size and not half his weight; but when it comes to talkin' she'd give him ninety miles start in a hundred, and be waiting at the winning post for him. I'm sorry for John. I dunno think I could ax John to do

more than he is doing, for he earns his money—if for nothing else than being a constant example to you and me never to get married unless it be to a dumb person. No, I mon let the garden, I think."

"But who would you let it to, master? There is nobody near enough to take it except our own men, and the married ones have their own gardens, though they don't do much with them, I'm afraid."

"Well," he said, "I was thinking of letting it to you."

"To me?" she exclaimed.

"Aye, lassie, to you, and Mary, and Lottie, and Bessie. I thought I would let you have a bit each. Divide one side of it into four parts and take the rent out of your wages." The last sentence was added with one of his most quizzical smiles.

"I don't understand. Why should I have part of the garden? I have no time to devote to it, and I don't think I know enough to work it successfully if I had."

"It is never too late to learn," he rejoined. "A bit of outdoor exercise would do you good, and I have noticed the girls have a bit of time in the afternoon usually, and they spend it in loitering round the stables after the lads. The parsons tell us the owd chap wi' the long tail is always on the look out for folks wi' nowt to do, and I dunno want him to get anybody from the Red Acres, and I dunno intend to let him if I con help it. Why shouldna the girls spend their time growing cauliflowers and carrots?"

"Well," she replied, "there is something to be said for your plan. I'll think it over and have a talk with them, but what rent shall I say you would want?"

"That's what I hanno quite made up my mind about. I dunno want to rob myself, or to seem to

be too grasping. There are four of you. Suppose I said—let me see"—and he scratched his head as if in great perplexity—"will sixpence a year from each of you do? That wouldna be rack rentin', would it?"

"That is to say," she replied with a smile, "you intend to give it to us. You are the most generous master I have ever met with."

"I thought you were going to say my generosity exceeded my beauty, and then I should have been vexed; but you are wrong. It binna generosity; it is just good business. To start wi', I shall get the other half of the garden looked after properly, which it binna now, and I shall make all the lassies of the other farmhouses jealous, and when I gi' you all the sack, as I may do some day, I shall ha' no difficulty in supplying your places. See?"

"I see through you, sir, as easily as I see through a hole in a ladder. Your brother is right when he says he believes you would rather be shot than have it said that you had done a generous deed."

"Our Rufe! Oh, you monno take any notice of what he says. He talks so much in the pulpit and out of it, that his tongue is loose at both ends. He ought to be gagged two days in the week, to give other folks a chance. You can tell him so from me."

"Your brother, Mr. Wentworth, is a very good man, and one you ought to be proud of."

"I am, in a way," replied Joe. "I trained him up in the way a brother should go when he was young, and now he is owd he sticks to it. I take some credit to myself about Rufe, that's a fact."

"Why, he is older than you; is he not? How could you train him?"

"That's it," replied Joe. "I towd him when there was anything good to eat that it was always the

privilege of the owdest to let the youngest ha' the first bite, and when he had anything I wanted very badly I took it, and explained that it was brotherly, according to the Bible teaching, to allow your little brother to have the best things. When father came home quarrelsome and ordered one of us to get up and make him a fire, as he sometimes did, I always let Rufe do it; especially in the winter time. You see, it was good practice, and it hardened him; and, as I didna want to stand in the way of his education, I denied myself and lay in bed instead. He has a lot to thank me for, has Rufe."

"I wonder when you *do* tell the truth?" she began.

"Always," he declared. "I've been to America, where they trotted out the story of George Washington and his hatchet, probably because it was such a rare thing for an American to tell the truth; but I said that was very small beer compared to the way some Englishmen stick to the truth, and, indeed, I could beat it myself. All George Washington had to fear was a thrashing, while I've had to fear a thrashing and bein' sent to bed wi'oot supper, when the only dinner I'd had was blackberry pie wi'oot any crust, or a slice of a frozen turnip. But mother brought us up to speak the truth and stick to it."

"I don't say you would wilfully deceive anyone, but you say things which are very misleading."

"That's since you came to the Red Acres, miss. I didna do it before. You ax the servants. It must be the effect of your company. The last Sunday I was at church the Vicar preached on keeping good company, and I saw him look my way several times. But what can I do? If I sent you away I believe I should ha' a riot, and the servants would burn the house on my head. So I mon take the risks."

"Mr. Wentworth, that speech gives me the opportunity of asking you a plain question. It is this: I've been here twelve months now, and sometimes I think you are not satisfied with me and my work. If so, I wish you would tell me."

"I'm very dissatisfied," replied Joe. "Very!"

"I'm sorry," replied Miss Davies. "I can honestly say I've done my best; but you ought to have told me before. I would have handed my notice in at once."

"Well, I'd a kind of feeling you'd improve as time went on, but you dunno; you get worse. I didna say anythin', because I hate to be complaining, and I'd rather put up wi' things I dunno like than be always grumbling. I always say, if you've a chip in your porridge there binna any sense in throwing the basin through the window; eat the porridge and leave the chip."

"You will please take a month's notice, sir," she answered, though her lip quivered, and there was a tear in her eye.

"I shall do nothing of the kind," said Joe. "Nobody leaves the Red Acres till I tell 'em."

"But I shall insist," she began.

"Insist as much as you like; but a rule is a rule, and binna going to be broken for anybody. Here you are, and here you ha' got to stop till I tell you to go."

"Well, then, won't you tell me what you are dissatisfied with, and I'll try and improve. I want to please you."

"Well," replied the farmer, "when Dunning was here I never had to change my linen oftener than once a fortnight, and now you make me do it every week. Then, if I wanted a thing I always knew where *not* to find it, and that was where it ought to be, and

there was some fun in hunting around for it. I once found my best hat in the potatoe bin, and on another occasion I lost a new pair of spurs, and they didna turn up for three months. Think of the surprise and delight when one day Dunny took down the warming pan and there they were sure enough! And I didna have to pull my boots off in the kitchen and put slippers on, and I was allowed to go upstairs when I wanted to, wi'oot troubling about which kind of boots I had got on. I could eat my meals wi'oot being bothered wi' a serviette, and if I liked to drop some of it on my best waistcoat, I could do it wi'oot being called over the coals. And I could lay in bed till dinner time wi'oot having to wake up to eat bacon and eggs, and if I had a cold in the head, I wanno coddled up, but took some hoss medicine and let it tak' its course. I was allowed to have holes in my socks to let in the ventilation, and my boots unblacked, unless I went to church or a funeral. Now all this is altered, and I have to mind my manners, and ask myself what my housekeeper will say and think if I dunno cut my hair and have a clean shave. I remember I munno eat my peas wi' a knife, or drink my coffee out of the saucer, wi'oot being pulled up as if I was a bairn. And I'm being made a gentleman that fast, that I shall by and by have a lad wi' blue velvet breeches and brass buttons to wait on me, and gi' me my bread and milk in a silver spoon in little mouthfuls, the same as if I was a baby. The long and short of it is I'm being spoilt, and I'm very dissatisfied."

"I see," she replied, smiling now. "But all this is for your good, you know."

"That's what they said to the man they tortured, and then burnt to death. They towd him it was

for his own good, but it didna make it any easier to put up wi'. However, I'll try and bear it. Only dunno be too hard on an old man, who didna get much chance when he was young, either to study etiquette or to practise being a swell six days a week and a gentleman on Sundays. You and I mon rub along together. I'll try and put up wi' things a bit longer, anyhow. There is always the chance some chap 'ull come along and lose his reason and his heart at the same time and marry you. So I cherish the hope I shall get rid of you some day in a respectable fashion, wi'oot having to disgrace the Red Acres by sending you away."

"If you wait for that, you'll wait a long time," she replied. "Besides, it isn't quite Christian, is it, to palm off on to another man what you don't want yourself?"

"Well, that all depends. I once had a hoss much given to stopping on a journey to view the landscape. He'd eat a lot, sweat a lot, and do little. Now, I'd no more use for a hoss like that than I had for an Egyptian mummy, and I was only waitin' for a suitable opportunity to turn him into cat's meat; when one day an old gent came along and wanted a hoss that wouldna run away, even from a German band, and that could pull a bath chair at the rate of four miles an hour. I towd him about 'Greased Lightning,' for that was what the stable lads called him, and he fell in love wi' him, and offered me twice as much as I should have asked for him, and four times as much as he was worth. I took the money and gave half of it to our Vicar to buy a new bell in the place of the one that fell and was cracked. So, you see, it dunno follow, because you dunno want a thing somebody else may not."

"Well," said Miss Davies, "I confess I've grown to like the Red Acres, and I should be very loth to leave it. The girls have wonderfully improved, and I seldom have to say an angry word to any one of them, and the men are very respectful and considerate, and I enjoy my work."

"Yes, if it wasna for the boss, who is a queer stick, it wouldna be a bad berth."

"The boss, sir," she replied, "is, I confess, a bit of a trial at times, but I wouldna change him for any other master in the country. He has strange qualities, but a heart of gold."

As the result of this conversation Joe set John to work to clear the ground, dig and manure it, and then he said, "Now, you lassies, I'm just a wee bit interested in seein' which of you con do the best wi' this. You con plant and grow anything you like, except nettles and docks and young men, and all you make you have. Miss Davies will see you ha' time; but no workin' on Sundays. If Sunday hadna bin made for us we should ha' invented it. I've long learnt that if a man conno do a good week's work in six days, he conno in seven. I knew a chap out West keen on making his pile, and worked his horses and his sons and his daughters seven days a week, fifty-two weeks in the year. You would think he would have soon run up a big banking account, but he didna. His horses knocked up, and he had no end of sickness among his family. And in the end he shot himself, and there was one fool on the earth less."

The Red Acres allotments did very well the first year, though Joe had, of course, to have some fun out of their owners. He promised to secure them some seeds when he was at Whitehurst, and each wrote down what she most desired to sow. Joe

bought the seeds, and on the way home exchanged the several papers in which they were wrapped. Having substituted mustard and cress for lettuces and radishes, and onions for sunflowers, he handed them to the girls, giving them a number of minute instructions as to the sowing of the seeds and the treatment of plants when they should appear above soil. Sally, who was a simple sort of lassie with a pretty face, he enjoined to sow the seeds by moonlight, saying that moonshine was good for onions, and then she was to be sure and "water them every morning wi' cowd tea"; which she faithfully did until John told her the master was only "having her on." Mustard and cress, he told Mary, "would be all the better for bein' soaked in buttermilk," but being country bred, and catching the twinkle in his eye, she did not try the experiment. He was equally unsuccessful when he explained to his housekeeper that paraffin poured on the peas as soon as they began to shoot kept the slugs away.

Joe watched the garden with interest, and one day he said to Sally: "Them lettuces and radishes you sowed must be a new variety. I binna an expert in gardenin', but I con tell a raspberry from a strawberry, if I taste them; so dunno take what I say for gospel; but I should think you're going to have radishes and lettuces that will surprise fowk. When I bought the seed, I asked Owd Owens to gi' me some that would grow hearts as big as stable buckets, for we were out for prizes at the Red Acres, and it seems to me he has done it. As for Mary's mustard and cress, it is slow at gettin' a start, but it will be coming some time during the next three years. But it strikes me I made a mistake when I let you lassies have these allotments. You've all got roses in your

cheeks since, and you look so blooming, I'm afraid every time you go to church or market some fellow will fall in love and run away wi' you."

It was one of Joe Wentworth's most repeated aphorisms, that a good master makes a good servant. One night he appeared with a grin on his face at his brother's house. "Rufe," he said, "con you take in a poor, homeless wanderer?"

"Why; what is the matter?"

"Matter?" he replied. "I thought I'd ha' a change of servants all round, and gave them all notice to quit, Sam, Lydia, and Bill, the whole clamjamfray of them, in fact."

"And what has happened?" asked Rufus.

"Why, they towd me I could go if I liked; but they were going to stick to Red Acres."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MINISTERS' FRATERNAL.

"I keep the company of parsons whenever I con. It is a kind of certificate of character."—J. W.

JOE and his brother stood looking one day at a field of wheat, ripe and ready for the reaper.

"I believe," said the farmer, "the Red Acres was called by that name because of the sorrel that grew upon it—it was red wi' it. If so, it ought to be called 'the Golden Acres' now. Look at that field of wheat! There binna a prettier sight in all England than that! It beats your roses all to fits, Rufe, my lad!"

"I'll not say that," replied the rose lover; "but I'll admit it's a sight to gladden the heart and please the eye."

"There's many a hungry bairn will get a feed out of that," said the practical Joe. "I like to think of children gatherin' round the table, and the mother taking a knife and cutting off a big slice of the loaf for each of them. Do you remember the kind of bread we had when we were lads? You could throw it against the wall and it would remain there, and when you tried to eat it it was proper stickjaw. I recollect the housekeeper at the Hall givin' me a piece of white bread, the fust I ever had, and I was afraid to eat it, and so brought it home and got mother to divide it between you and her, and per-

suaded her I'd had such a tuck-in there wonno any room for more."

"Do you mean you hadna had any?" asked Rufe. "I remember it very well."

"Well," said Joe, "I nibbled a bit off the corner as I came home, just to say I had tasted it, but I durst not let myself loose on it, or it would have all gone, and I wanted mother to have a treat for once in her life. I'd give half I possess just to have her for one day at the Red Acres and gi' her four good square meals. Turkey and plum pudding for dinner, and the best that could be got for breakfast and the other meals. I never con understand why you and I should ha' such a good time while mother, who was worth the two of us put together, and an Archbishop and three Methodist parsons thrown in, had such a struggle to get a decent meal, and was glad to wear other women's cast-off clothin'? I'd like to hear you explain that some time when you're howding forth in the pulpit. Seems to me that it would take as much argument to prove a crooked line is straight as to prove that it was fair."

"I couldna prove it, and I wouldna try; but I was over at Kidderminster, and Mr. Bonner, who is a fine rosarian, took me to see his carpet factory. They were busy wi' one that had to go to Windsor Castle, and I stood and looked at it. I could make neither top nor tail of it. The threads of blue and red and grey were all mixed up together, and there didna seem any pattern in it, and I said so to Mr. Bonner. Then he took me round to the other side of the loom, and there it was sure enough, the Royal Arms, and the lion and the unicorn, and the letters V.R., as plain as plain could be; and it taught me a lesson. We are lookin' at things on the wrong side of the

loom just now, and what we think is just a tangle and a mess may be workin' out a great Divine pattern, after the plan God has in His own mind."

"You may be reet," rejoined his brother. "Anyhow, it binna any use sitting cryin' your eyes out for what might ha' been, but there are some hard nuts to crack, and you preachers mostly spend your time in tryin' to persuade poor simple mortals like me that there binna nuts at all, but eggs, and that if we only sit and wait long enough they'll hatch out, and that every egg will turn out a golden pheasant, or at least a silver one. But we are goin' to begin harvesting to-morrow. Bin you comin' along to gi' us a hand?"

"Not to-morrow. I invited all the Nonconformist ministers from Whitehurst to come over and see the roses, and have tea with us, and Lucy and Gwen are busy makin' cheese cakes and tarts and all sorts of fine things, and so I walked over here out of the way."

"Well, now, Rufe Wentworth, I call that real shabby," exclaimed Joe, "to ha' a 'blow out' like that and not invite your own brother to come! I didna think you'd ha' done it. Just think of the chance of making him a reformed character, wi' all those parsons on the job! How many did you say were comin'?"

"Twelve at least; but I didna think you'd care to come, especially as it was a busy time and the beginning of harvest wi' you."

"I'd gi' my top boots to be there?" replied Joe. "To hear twelve parsons talkin' all at once—why, it would be like livin' in a rookery when the crows are in parliament."

"Well," replied Rufus, "you con still come if you like."

"I never like bein' an after-thought," said Joe. "Just called in to fill a gap, or because I conno wi'

decency be left out. No, I dunno think I will, though I'm sure I should ha' enjoyed it as much as bramble tart and Devonshire cream, which is so good that I guess the angels ha' it hot for tea every day. But I shanno forgive you in a hurry not lettin' me know sooner. You wait till we have a randy-dazzle at the Red Acres, old man. You shall get your invitation to it three days after it is over."

"It never entered my head to think you would care to come among so many ministers," said Rufus. "I shall know better next time; but come by all means. Lucy and Gwen will be delighted."

"No, I wunno," replied Joe. "I binna goin' to be treated like a poor relation in this manner; but I see now why you get invited to preach up and down the country—you invite the parsons to tea, and gi' 'em raisin' cake, and a bouquet of roses and a bunch of grapes to take home. Then, when they are hard up, they say, 'Oh, there's that chap Wentworth! He does like to hear himself talk as well as a lad likes rice puddin' wi' plenty of currants in. We will gi' him a turn for once. Our folks will put up wi' him for a change, and be thankful, after a dose such as he gives 'em, that they get so much better stuff every Sunday. Besides, if I dunno ax him he will not invite me to go to Summerton again, and those roses were not to be sneezed at, and as for the grapes—they were the finest I ever tasted in my life.' I've found you out, old chap, at last, and the cat is out of the bag wi' a vengeance."

"Have it that way if you like," replied Rufus; "but you know the old saying, '*Honi soit qui mal y pense*'?"

"What language is that you are using? Remember this, Rufe Wentworth, I'll have no swearin' on my place."

"Oh, well," said Rufus laughing, "it is French for 'Evil be to him who evil thinks.' I thought you'd ha' known that."

"Good motto, that. I've a good mind to have it put up in my stables, so that the fellows who come buying hosses, and believe I'm goin' to tak' 'em in, may read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. The next chap who comes moochin' about and lookin' for faults where there are none, I shall yell at him, 'Honour sweat a key and mind your pence!' You ha' better write it down for me, lest I forget it. But who did you say was coming to-morrow?"

"Oh, all the Free Church ministers. They have what they call a fraternal at Whitehurst, and once a year they have an outing, and the secretary, a Baptist minister, the Rev. W. Frobisher, wrote they were coming to Summerton, and asked if they might come and see my garden. They were arranging to have tea at the Congregational School. So Lucy and I agreed it would be nicer to have them to our place to tea, and invite them to bring their wives wi' them, but it seems two are widowers, three are bachelors, and some cannot come; so there were only four of the women folks to count. That's all there is in it."

"And enough, too. Twelve parsons, four women, and you and the missus and Gwen. It fairly makes me ache when I think of the clack of your tongues. The rookery binna in it. It will be like Bedlam when the lunatics are havin' a holiday. But tell the missus," he continued with a twinkle in his eye, "not to let them parsons eat all the good things. I conno come this week; but, let me see; we shall ha' this field cut and carried by next Wednesday, and we shanno ha' nothin' else ready for a little while, so I'll come on

Thursday—that is a week to-morrow—and help to eat up the scraps left over."

"You know you are welcome any time," replied Rufus. "Now I must be going."

"So mon I. You've wasted me a good hour now. I dunno like to be impolite and tell you to go, but I certainly dunno want you to stop!"

Directly Rufus had gone, Joe hurried home and sent a boy on horseback to the post office at Stourbridge with a telegram, and then went off whistling in great, good humour. Sam, the head groom, who understood his master as well as anybody, used to say, "When master whistles, somebody's catched it."

The next day Rufus and his wife sat waiting for their guests, with all their preparations made. It was a glorious day, so a long table had been spread under the trees in the garden, in full view of the roses, which were at their best, and were worth travelling a long way to see. The table was resplendent with flowers, and luscious bunches of the finest grapes filled a silver dish.

Three o'clock, the time they had arranged to arrive, came, but no guests appeared. Half-past three, then four, and still they did not come.

"I hope there hanno bin a accident on the way," said Rufus. "They were driving over in a char-a-banc, and it's a nasty hill they have to drive down when they get out of the town."

Still the clock ticked wearily forward, and no guests appeared. "Surely I hanno made a mistake as to the date," said Rufus. "I will look it up. I have Mr. Frobisher's letter. It's very vexin'."

He went and hunted up the letter, and found the date was right. At half-past five the disappointed

trio sat down to tea, conjuring up all sorts of possible excuses for the non-appearance of their guests.

"I mon run over after tea," said Rufus. "I'm sure somethin' has happened, and I conno rest till I know. I shall just ha' time to catch the quarter to seven train, and I con walk back."

At ten that night the good man arrived home, tired and as much out of temper as his good wife had ever seen him. "It's our Joe again!" he said. "It really is too bad. When I got to Mr. Frobisher's he showed me a telegram he had received, purporting to come from me, asking the ministers, owing to unforeseen circumstances, to kindly put their visit off till next Thursday. It was signed 'Rufe,' and it was sent from Stourbridge. Joe is sharp, but he binna sharp enough. I never call myself 'Rufe,' neither does anybody else but him, and I hanno bin near Stourbridge post office for three months. I told you he was vexed at not bein' axed, and he said he would come next Thursday; and all the ministers were upset, for they had kept the day clear, and were lookin' forward to coming and were greatly disappointed."

"It really is too bad, as you say," said Mrs. Wentworth. "By next Thursday half the stuff will be spoilt, and I really don't know what to do with it all."

"Oh, I forgot to say that I've arranged for them to come to-morrow. We wonno say anythin' about it, and Joe will come next Thursday and expect to find them here. Maybe he will discover other folks con play jokes as well as he!"

"Capital! I don't mind much, so that my pastry and other things are not spoilt and wasted."

"I guess Joe will be sold when he finds he has bin hoisted wi' his own petard. I wondered at the time

why he was so particular about Mr. Frobisher's address. But he carries his jokes too far, and I shall tell him so."

The ministers came next day, and Rufus had to explain as best he could, but none of them were greatly surprised when they heard that Joe had been the cause of the difficulty, for the stories of his jokes and witty and impudent sayings were repeated all over the countryside. Indeed, some of them were a little sorry that the picnic had not been deferred till the master of the Red Acres could have been present, for those who had not met him felt they would like to have seen so notorious a character.

On the next Thursday, about four o'clock, Joe drove up, to find Rufus with his coat off, busy at work among his roses.

"Hallo, Rufe!" he exclaimed. "Where are all the sky-pilots? Not turned up yet, eh? Well, if they dunno come soon I shall set to myself, and there wonno be much left when I have finished."

"What are you talking about?" asked Rufus, with a quiet smile. "There binna any 'do' to-day that I am aware of. I believe Lucy is expecting you to tea, but that is all."

"But what about that parsons' picnic you talked about?"

"Oh, that was last week," replied Rufus. "I towd you so; didna I?"

"Did you? I must ha' got mixed in the dates. I came expectin' to meet them and put 'em through their paces."

"I know you did, but for once you are a day after the fair. Lucy has a bone to pick wi' you."

"I've a good mind to go back," said Joe. "I con face ten ministers sooner than one woman."

"I always thought you were a bit of a coward where women were concerned, but you ha' got to face the music this time. For here is somebody coming who will take care you dunno run away. Come here, Gwen! Here is Uncle Joe talking of going back wi'oot his tea."

"Now for it!" said Joe. "Wait till I pull my socks up. Well, young lady, you're a beauty, binna you?—invitin' your uncle to come to tea to meet distinguished company, and when he arrives the only company is an owd man, a woman, and a bit of a lassie as plain as a pike staff. But I know why you didna want me to be here. You were after one of those parsons—most likely a widower—and you didna want me to witness your flirtin'."

"We didn't invite you at all, sir," she replied; "but with your usual modesty you invited yourself. Mother is very cross with you for sending that telegram. We got everything ready and then nobody came."

"Well, let us go and get it over. I'm always for gettin' unpleasant things done wi' quickly."

"Hallo, missus!" he said, as he entered the house a few minutes later. "Gwen says you are goin' to go for me wi' the rollin' pin and flat iron. I'm very sorry if I put you to any inconvenience by sending that telegram; but the fact is, Rufe put my gorge up. He towd me of all the fine things you had made—mince pies, cream buns, cheese cakes, plum cake, seed cake, raisin' cake, and jellies—that I was downreet mad at bein' left out and I deferred it for a week—at least I tried to, but I've bin had. I'll admit that, for I'd got it in for those parsons. There would ha' been some fun if I'd caught 'em here, and I reckon I've missed the opportunity of a lifetime. So shake hands. If you were disappointed, it binna

half the disappointment I feel in not having a chance to go for those sky engineers."

"It was very wrong of you," replied Mrs. Wentworth in her gentle manner—"very wrong indeed."

"So it was," rejoined Joe. "I know I ought not to ha' done it, but I'm one of those chaps who do things fust and reflect about 'em after. My conscience has bin as busy as a terrier running a rat round a barn ever since. It hanno given me any rest. It dunno act often, but when it does there binna any more peace than if you'd got the toothache in all your teeth at once, and there was a competition going on among them as to which could ache the most. I believe I'm losin' weight over it, for my waistcoat is mighty slack just now. Gwen and I are going to kiss and be friends, but I darena ax you to do the same lest Rufe be jealous. But you'll be friends, won't you? and I'll ha' tea wi' you, just to show there binna any bitter feelin' on my part.

"Come in, Rufe!" he cried as his brother's form darkened the doorway. "I've forgiven you now for not inviting me to tea wi' the parsons, and I feel a glow of virtue all over me; but mind you dunno do it again, or I shall end our acquaintanceship and cut you off wi' a shilling, and I'll take good care even that's a bad 'un!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE HORSE PARADE.

"I've known hosses who had far more sense than the men who rode them."—J. W.

ONE of the sights of the Summerton district was the morning parade of the horses from Joe's stables. From a score to forty turned out every morning, sleek, sprightly creatures; dancing, trotting, galloping. At their head always rode Sam, with his red hair and redder face, mounted generally on some special favourite. Joe never missed witnessing this sight, when at home. It always retained its charm for him. He generally stood watching until the last horse had turned the corner of the road, and then went in to his breakfast with a smile of satisfaction. Every horse was examined critically as it passed, and some remark—witty, playful, or condemnatory—hurled at riders according as the case required.

"Sit up, lad; you're ridin' like a bag of chips!" he would shout. "George, gi' that hoss its head. You're howding him as tight as if he was your sweetheart." "Halloa, Davie! Are you better?" he said to a pale-faced lad. "You shouldna ha' come back to work so soon, lad. You look as if you'd rubbed your face agin a whitewashed wall. When you come back, go home and tell your mother to feed you on apple dumplings for a week."

So with great good humour he greeted one after

the other in the procession as it passed. Any sign of neglect or carelessness, however, was immediately detected, and woe to the unlucky stable lad who incurred his displeasure. His tongue was like the lash of a buffalo whip. It was the unpardonable sin with him either to neglect a horse or to treat it cruelly.

"We dunno need any Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals at the Red Acres," he said, when an agent of that institution called upon him in relation to a case of a poor, starving horse kept by some gipsies who were encamped near his farm. "I am the Society; treasurer, secretary, president, judge, and executioner. Any man about my place who binna kind to animals would ha' short shrift. I did once find a lad teasing a hoss wi' a thistle. He went home wi' the soundest thrashing he had ever had in his life, and his mother came to see me and nearly bit my head off. She called me some names that binna either in the Bible or the dictionary, and I had to go round the buildings to see if all the roofs were on after the explosion was over. But it did good, and the lad is now second stableman, and, I daresay, prays hard that Sam may die early so that he con be first. But Sam binna one of the dyin' sort; he's got a good berth here, and he hangs on to it 'tooth and nail,' and I dunno blame him. A parson once towd me there are hosses in heaven—red, and black, and white—and Sam has a notion that he'll get a job up there in the stables."

One morning his brother stood by his side as the horses paraded past, and Joe was in great good humour.

"This is a sight for sore eyes, Rufe, my boy!" he said, as the horses turned out of the stable yard. "You'd have to travel many a mile to see one equal

to it. Forty-three of 'em, and every one Class A. There binna a rotter amongst 'em. Look at that mare Sam is on! She's nearly worth her weight in gold. She has got Arab blood in her veins, and I'll back her to gallop farther and faster than any hoss in this county or the next to it. I've put all my savings in her skin, and have borrowed a couple of hundred at the bank as well. She's a true 'Air-drinker,' that one, and Sam and her between 'em have as much pride as would set up Beelzebub and all his angels, supposing them to be out of the commodity. She has a forehead like a philosopher, a throat like a lady, and ears as fine and delicate as a society beauty. She carries her head like a queen, and is absolutely perfect in outline. To ride her is like riding in a first-class carriage, with a couple of extra cushions on the seat. I only got her by accident, for she was brought over to England for a famous breeder; but he conveniently died while she was on the voyage. I met the ship at Liverpool, made an offer, beggared myself to do it, and came home the happiest man in England. I darena tell you how I prevented two other men from gettin' there in time, seein' you are a Methody preacher, but I did it, and they landed just as I was leadin' her away. I got to know about her from two chaps who were talking one neet in an hotel where I was staying. They had drunk enough strong liquor to make them want to seem big, and I drew 'em on by professin' to be as green as grass. You shall ha' a ride on her some day, maybe."

"Not I," laughed Rufus. "I hanno been on a hoss's back since I was a lad, and I'm too owd and stiff to start again."

"And you a Wentworth!" exclaimed his brother. "Rufe, I'm ashamed to own you. Never had a ride

on a hoss's back since you were a lad! Man, think what you ha' missed!"

"I've missed a broken neck," replied Rufus.

"Pooh! A man who conno take care of his own neck, either on horseback or off, dunno deserve to ha' a neck. Whatever have you found to keep yourself awake wi' if you hanno had a ride on hossback all these years?"

"Plenty; life has been full of interests. Religion, flowers, books, home, politics and preaching. I've had fewer dull hours, I think, than most, and more happier ones, maybe, than any other man in the village. I sometimes say I am one of the six happiest men in England, and I dunno where the other five are to be found."

"If you've never had a good hoss between your knees wi' a mad desire to catch up to an express train which started three hours before, you dunno know what life at its best is," rejoined Joe. "It is something which makes your blood tingle to think of afterwards and dream about at nights."

"It may be so, but I've managed very well without it so far, and I shall manage now to the end. I like driving a decent horse, I'll confess, but I'm a bit nervous wi' your high steppers."

"Halloa!" Joe shouted to a lad who was climbing on a horse in a clumsy sort of way. "That binna the way to mount. You look as though you were goin' to get on a hobby hoss at a fair. Hanno you got any spring in you?"

As the leader of the procession filed through the gate, he said to the groom, "Sam, mind none of those hosses kick that mare. Be as careful of her as if she was your wife on your weddin' day, and you were just comin' out of church."

"Yes, master," replied Sam, patting the arched neck of the noble animal.

"What do you think of her, Sam? Is she all right?"

"She's *the* ticket," he replied, grinning his satisfaction.

"Worth ten pounds of anybody's money, eh?" said his master with a sly twinkle in his eye.

"Well, say nine pounds nineteen and elevenpence three farthings," replied the groom, accustomed to answer him according to his own manner.

"Oh, well, we shanno stickle about the balance. Off you go, and show Rufus how a hoss con trot that has an Arab pedigree to maintain."

Away flew the beautiful creature, like an arrow from a bow, and Joe's eyes shone, and he clapped his hands in admiration as he watched her leaving the others behind. As she turned the bend out of sight of the watchers, Joe still stood a moment, and then, patting his brother on the shoulder, he exclaimed, "Rufe, I've longed for a hoss all my life wi' Arab blood in it, and I've got one at last. I'm the happiest man between here and the North Pole. Come in, and you shall have the best breakfast Miss Davies con cook, and that is as good as any woman con gi' you this side of London."

"Are Arab horses so scarce, then?" asked Rufus.

"They are as scarce as sovereigns in the workhouse," replied his brother. "That one binna a pure-bred Arab, or it wouldna be here. An Arab will part with his wife far sooner than with his hoss. One of the true breed is worth a king's ransom. The Arabs say, 'God created the horse out of the wind as He created man out of the mud,' and maybe he is reet; for I have seen men that were pretty well all

mud, and not very inspired mud at that, and hosses that seemed to challenge the wind to have a gallop."

"I'm afraid you think too much of your horses, Joe!" said Rufus.

"Aye, about as much as my brother thinks of his roses," he rejoined with a sly look; "and there is this to be said, the one is a hobby for men wi' brains, and the other for women and bairns."

"Nonsense. It certainly takes as much brains and patience and tact, and certainly more taste, to grow roses than it does to breed horses. You should talk about what you know," he added with a touch of sarcasm.

"Take the medicine out of your own bottle, and you would be silent a good deal more than you are," retorted Joe.

"Ah, well, we monno quarrel about our hobbies, anyhow. I was born wi' a love of flowers—that I got from my mother. Remember how she always used to like to have some flowers on the table even if they were only buttercups or wild roses. You got your love of horses from dad, who inherited it with his gipsy blood."

"It was the only thing I did get from him for which I am thankful," said Joe. "But it is as you say, and it binna any use you trying to make a flower grower of me, or me tryin' to make a hoss dealer of you. We mon each go our own gait. But you like to get a bit of preachin' at me whenever you con, and you might as well expect to turn a pig into a sheep by rubbin' butter on his bristles. Put me down as a rank outsider so far as being a saint is concerned. I have never been a candidate for a front seat in the Gloryland."

"No, but you may reach there yet, for I dunno

know a man who does more kind deeds and says less about 'em than you. I sometimes think you've got the root of the matter in you."

"Bah!" replied Joe. "You've gone wi'oot your breakfast so long you ha' got wind on the stomach. It's a good feed you need. Come in! but mind you wipe your boots, or you'll get those three hairs left put into a curl paper. I ha' to do it every time, or my housekeeper puts her war paint on, and I get blown sky-high, and come down in ever so many pieces. I used to be master in my own house, and I could go to bed wi' my shoes on if I liked, and sleep in 'em, but now I ha' to go upstairs in my slippers and wash my hands and face every time I come in. I dunno know how much scented soap I use in a week, but it runs away wi' a lot of coppers. I never knew it was so costly to be a gentleman before."

"I'm glad you've found somebody who con keep you in order," replied Rufus. "You've run wild long enough, and it is time the Red Acres had a mistress who con rule not only the servants but the master."

"I'm larning," said Joe. "I know now somethin' about what married men ha' to put up wi', but wi' this difference, I con end the schooling at any time, and they conno. That accounts for them going about wi' a dejected God-help-me sort of look, as if they said, 'Please ha' pity on me! I'm a mon who has to do as he is towd.'"

"Now you are drawing on your imagination. The happiest men in the world are married men."

"That's so?" asked Joe. "Well, all I con say is, they've a queer way of showing it. Here, missie!" he cried, as his housekeeper came to meet them. "Our Rufe is usin' all his eloquence in trying to

persuade me to get married. What do you think of that?"

"A sensible thing to do if only you marry the right woman," she answered with a smile.

"How am I to tell her? That's what bothers me," he replied. "If women were only labelled for whom they were intended, it would prevent a lot of blunders being made. As it is, I should never be sure that I hadna got the one that was intended for somebody else."

"Oh, you'll know when the right one turns up," she said.

"Well, I conno make it out. I've heard say that you feel a kind of flutterin' round the heart, and a sinkin' in the pit of the stomach, when you come across the one and only woman; but, if so, I think many folks ha' mistaken a bit of flatulence for the real genuine flutterment, for they've got hold of the wrong one. But what ha' you got for breakfast? Burnt porridge and salty bacon as usual?"

"I've got sweetbreads and bacon and boiled eggs," she replied. "But after that speech I doubt whether I ought to give you any. You naughty man, you've never had burnt porridge in my time."

"Oh, hanno I? Well, then, it was when Dunnings was here, and the taste was so bad it's remained ever since. But, I say, you shouldna gi' us such a set out when our Rufe is here. He'll think we live like fighting cocks. I thought it would be a chance for us eating up all the stale bread and that cheese Dunning left behind as a legacy, which walks about the loft at neet for exercise. You binna half so sharp as I thought you were! Sweetbreads and bacon and eggs—why, that's a breakfast fit for the Lord Chancellor. My! it makes me smack my lips to look at

that dish; and the coffee smells like an Italian garden full o' orange blossom. Now, Rufe, say grace and fire away. If you burst any buttons off, there are needles and thread in missie's work basket, so dunno spare the food. If you can work as hard wi' your teeth as you con wi' your tongue, there wunno be much left."

"How are Mrs. Wentworth and Gwen?" asked Miss Davies.

"They are very well, miss, thank you, and send their love and an invitation to come to tea on Tuesday. There will be some strawberries ripe by then."

"We will come and bring our own cream," exclaimed Joe. "I never saw the strawberry I couldna put out of sight in two bites yet. Lydia could do it in one, I've no doubt, because her mouth is made for eatin' strawberries, but I'm handicapped and ought to be given five minutes' start at any strawberry feast, or else I dunno get my fair share."

Miss Davies flushed and was about to retort, when Rufus said, "Dunno you take any notice of him, miss. I believe he'd rather say an aggravating thing than have his breakfast any time. But he binna included in the invitation this time. I shall be away from home, and Lucy and Gwen want you all to themselves. They are busy wi' some new dresses, and want your help; so Joe mon wait for his strawberries till another time."

"And serve him right, too," retorted the housekeeper. "Indeed, he does not deserve any at all, after the remark he made just now, which is as rude as it is untrue."

"I wonno come," said the farmer. "I wouldna be shut up wi' three women discussing blouses and skirts and frills and flounces for all the strawberries in your

garden. Hallo! there's Sam ridin' the Arab like streaked lightning. What's up, I wonder?" and he hurried to the door just as the groom cleared the low wall into the yard at a flying leap.

"One of the hosses has come a cropper, mister," he said. "He was jumpin' a fence and fell and rolled on the lad. I'm afraid it has done for him; but the hoss is all reet."

"Who is it?" asked Joe.

"It's Davie, sir. Shall I fetch the doctor?"

"Aye! Off you go, and dunno spare the mare. No," he said, "you'd better yoke Briton in the trap and bring Dr. Gilmour back with you. That owd mare of his wouldna come any faster than a cripple pushing a wheelbarrow. But I hope it binna as bad as you think."

Just when Sam had started, and Rufus was offering to go and fetch the boy's mother, the horses returned from their airing, and riding in front of them was Davie, the lad who was thought to be killed.

"What on earth does it mean?" asked Joe. "Sam must have had something strong in his coffee this morning. Halloa, Davie!" he shouted, "is that you or is it your ghost?"

"Please, Mr. Wentworth, the hoss didna jump high enough and fell, and I was under him, but the ground was soft, so I didna get hurt much. I'm sorry, sir, but it wonno my fault."

"No," replied Joe. "I dunno think it was. I'm glad you binna hurt. But you'd better have a day's holiday, and here is five shillings to buy a new hat. I like a lad wi' pluck. You'd better ride after Sam—he's gone to the doctor's and the undertaker's, too, for aught I know. And it wouldna do to ha' a second-hand coffin on our hands."

"Please, sir, may I give the five shillin's to my mother instead of buyin' a new hat? She is a bit put to it to pay the rent just now?"

"Aye, lad; and I'll gi' you a rise in your wages. I conno afford half-a-crown a week more, but I'll gi' you two-and-fivepence-ha'penny. And, Davie, always be good to your mother. You'll never ha' another when she's gone. You con choose a wife, but you conno choose a mother. I'd the best mother that ever lived, but you've nothin' to complain of. Do as your mother tells you; keep your feet warm and your head cool, and sixpence in your pocket; then you needna fear to look the world in the face. And if ever your mother is in a tight corner for her rent, as she conno squeeze out, let me know, Davie. I believe our Rufe has got a fund for helpin' foaks in tight corners, and I'll see if I conno get something out of him."

CHAPTER X.

SOME BUNCHES OF GRAPES.

"Life wi'oot fun is like an orange wi'oot juice, or courtship wi'oot kisses."—J. W.

RUFUS WENTWORTH had set his heart on winning the first prize for grapes at the Summerton Flower Show, and his determination seemed likely to be crowned with success. The Squire's gardener had grudgingly admitted that he had nothing to equal those he saw in Wentworth's vinery, and Rufus had also seen Lord Flintshire's, and was persuaded that he had nothing in his houses as good as his own.

Of course, other competitors might turn up, but it was hardly likely, as the prize was not sufficiently large enough to tempt anybody from a distance. As for the Vicar, he only showed for courtesy, and had never yet reached anything better than "highly commended."

On the night before the Show, Joe called on his brother, and was shown round the houses.

"My! Rufe!" he said, as the latter proudly expatiated on the merits of the black Hamburgs, "they are stunners! You could take two bites at some of 'em, and then come again. You'll take the shine out of them gardeners and no mistake. Swinnerton's head swelled so much last time when he got all the 'Firsts,' you could nearly see his hat liftin'. How have you managed it?"

"Well, I've given a bit of extra care to 'em this time, and I got a hint or two from a chap I met at a Rose Show when I was a judge. I gave him a wrinkle or two about roses and he gave me the benefit of his experience wi' grapes."

"Well! I've seen a good many grapes in my time, and eaten a few; but they are like my hosses—they cannot be beaten. Mind you send a few bunches after the Show to the Red Acres. I should like to sample 'em, and as I've a good crop of crab apples growing on a tree in the meadows, I con send you a few of them in exchange."

"You shall have some, and you can keep your crabs. We wouldna gi' a shillin' a bushel for 'em. We dunno want any more of 'em here."

"I shouldna think you do; you're sour enough anyway. But which bunches are you going to show?"

"This, and this one, and this, and maybe this other here. They are certainly the finest."

"You are as sure of the 'First' this time as if you had it now," replied Joe. "You're a lucky chap, when all is said and done. Instead of grapes at the Red Acres, we ha' to put up wi' blaeberries and blackberries. Well, I mon be going. We are showing nothing but butter and eggs, and the lassies are puttin' a few vegetables in, but there wunno be many prizes come our way."

"Rufe is cocksure he's going to be at the top of the tree this time," Joe told his housekeeper. "He's sittin' rubbing his hands like a lad that's expectin' to git a threepenny-bit on Saturday for keeping his face clean; but maybe he'll get a shock. I shouldna wonder if he does."

"What do you mean?" asked Miss Davies. "Do you think somebody may beat him?"

"No; not by fair play. I dunno think those grapes con be beaten in this county or the next to it; but sometimes accidents happen when you are most certain, and I've a notion that something will happen in this case. I heard a very clever chap once in Liverpool lecturing and he said, sometimes you ha' a kind of feeling that a thing will occur; you conno account for it; but there it is, and that thing does occur. He declared we have got it through an undeveloped sense. Well, my undeveloped sense has bin working wi' his coat off, and I'm morally certain that our Rufe will get a surprise in the morning which will nearly shake the teeth out of his head."

"You know something, Mr. Wentworth," she said. "Now, what is it?"

"Me? Now, how could I? You're as sharp as a wasp's sting, but you are as far out of it as if you were in the Bay of Biscay and wanted the Gulf of Mexico. Good neet, lassie. I may be in the stables half an hour or so. I've a hoss a bit cranky, so dunno sit up, and mind you put your hair into curl papers. We dinna want the Red Acres left behind to-morrow either in sense or beauty."

The next morning, after a hearty breakfast, Joe brought out a basketful of grapes, and said, "Here, missie, I want you to arrange these in a dish and send them up to the Flower Show as from the Red Acres. Be sure you dunno crush one of 'em, and put your best into the decoration so that the little 'uns will look big, and the big 'uns will look bigger."

"But, master," she said, "you cannot exhibit them. To start with, it would not be honest; and then everybody knows we have no hot houses and do not grow grapes."

"Do as you are towd," he said. "This is my funeral, and I'm going to run it as I like."

"Mr. Wentworth," she replied, as an idea suddenly struck her, "I believe those grapes are stolen from your brother's vinery."

"For shame! Me steal?" he cried. "Nothin' of the sort. I never touched one of 'em till I found 'em in that basket in the front parlour. I guess the same fairy that Rufe says left Gwen when she was a baby in a wheelbarrow took pity on us, and sent them to the Red Acres. Lucky thing they came on Flower Show mornin'. It might ha' been planned."

"It has been planned," she replied; "and I think it is a great shame. Those grapes came from the Rosery."

"Well," he replied, "they do look uncommonly like some I saw in Rufe's glasshouse yesterday; but then grapes are so much alike, it is difficult to be sure."

"It is one of your tricks," she replied. "I don't know what you are doing, but if you are going to spoil your brother's chance of taking the prize, I think it is very shabby, and I don't like having anything to do with it."

"Rufe will get the prize, sure enough," he said. "I did think I'd ha' some potatoes painted to look like grapes, but then I thought I'd be found out, and I dinna like to be dishonest when it is pretty certain to be detected. But be a good lass, and do as I tell you, and I'll drive down to the tent wi' those grapes myself, so there binna any mishap and no eatin' 'em on the way. My! they make one's mouth water to look at 'em."

When Rufus went into his greenhouse that morning, he certainly had the surprise of his life. The door was unlocked, a pair of steps knocked over,

and his largest bunches of grapes were gone. He stood and gazed in astonishment for a time, then turned on his heel with a look of keen disappointment on his face, and returned to the house to tell his wife.

"It's awfully disappointing," he said. "My mind was bent on winning that prize more than it has been on anything for a long time. I conna think who has done it. It wonna be anybody living in the village, for there binna anyone who would steal from me. It mon ha' been some tramp or other."

"It is very annoying," she replied. "Had you better not go and inform the police?"

"No," he replied. "I wonna do that. I couldna put a fellow-creature in gaol for taking a few bunches of grapes, even though they were my best, and the prize depended on them. I'll say this for the thief—whoever it was—he knew where to pick. I mon make the best of it, and cut some bunches from those left; but I know they wonno ha' a chance for the first prize. I may pull off a second, though I had set my heart on being first. I wonno say but what it has upset me more than it ought. I mon go and have half an hour quiet, and think and pray about it. Our Joe will be frightfully upset. I was showing him the bunches last neet I intended showing, and I never saw him more interested. It's a blow, but we monno make too much of it."

In spite of a big effort, as he said, "to pull himself together," the glory had gone out of the morning for Rufus, and it was with little interest that he at length braced himself to cut the choicest of the bunches still left, and get Gwen to prepare them for exhibition. As he was carrying them to the tent he met his brother coming out.

"Good morning, Rufe!" exclaimed the farmer.

"Kind of morning, this, to make you feel as if you must duck your head for fear of bumping it agin the clouds. I counted thirty-three different kinds of birds whistling as I came along. That is, if you con count crows and magpies. They dunno produce much music, but they make a big noise, like some of you Methodists. It is grand for the Flower Show. It might ha' been made on purpose."

"Aye, it is a perfect morning," replied Rufus. "And it's a beautiful world we live in. The only thing that spoils it is man's wrong doing."

"What's up now?" asked Joe. "Liver out of order? or has the missus been givin' you a dressin'-down? You ought to be as cheerful as a lark and as pert as a cricket; but instead you look as though you'd had a dose of paregoric and juniper mixed. Here is the Flower Show goin' to be the best on record, and you're as sure of a 'first' for your grapes as I am to die a bachelor. I've just been looking at 'em. Sir John's are like little black currants compared with yours, and Swinnerton was just saying he hanno got a look in with you. And they have given yours the best place on the table. I con tell you I had to shut my eyes and put my hands tight behind me, lest I should be tempted to take some."

"But mine binna there yet," replied Rufus. "The fact is my best bunches were stolen last neet."

"Come, come, Rufe; none of your tales. A local preacher ought to speak the truth, and now you are fibbin' like a bishop. If them grapes in there binna the same I saw hangin' last neet in your greenhouse I'll eat my hat for dinner and my boots for tea."

"But," exclaimed Rufus, "I tell you my grapes binna there yet. I've got 'em in this basket."

"Well, all I know is there is a big dishful all set

round wi' leaves, so that they look a picture, and they are labelled wi' your number, and Johnson says they came from the Rosery."

Rufus could hardly believe his own ears, and pushing past his brother, he entered the tent, to find things exactly as his brother had described, much to his great amazement. There were his grapes nicely set out, with his number on them.

"Who brought these?" he asked of Johnson, the steward who was receiving the exhibits.

"Your brother, Mr. Wentworth. He said he had just brought them round to save you the trouble, and he was as full of his jokes as usual. He declared he knew they had been stolen, and he would advise me to inform the judge so. He wanted me to promise not to tell who had brought them, as he dinna want to have his name mixed up in a shady job. It is a good thing we all know him."

"Well," replied Rufus, "he has been at his tricks again, and has given me the worst hour I've had for many a year. I dunno know how, or when, he fetched them, but those bunches disappeared out of my vinery some time between dark and daylight, and I thought they had gone for good. I never thought of him for a minute, but I might ha' done, for it was only last neet I showed him the bunches I was going to exhibit; but I am as glad as a lad who has found a new shilling that he had lost. I mon get away home and tell Lucy and Gwen, for they are both a bit down about the loss of those grapes."

Sure enough, Rufus took first prize. Joe declared it was the way his housekeeper had set them out which had won the admiration of the judges, and not the quality of the grapes themselves. "I guess," he said to his housekeeper, "Rufe looked like a hen wi'

the moult when I met him this morning. And didn't his wife and Gwen go for me? I had to feel myself all over to find where there were any pieces chopped off, and I wouldna ha' missed the look on Rufe's face for a good donkey wi' a cart thrown in!"

"I really think you deserved all you got. Your brother is a man in a thousand, or he would not put up with your constant teasing and jokes."

"I am sorry, but I mon have a bit of fun out o' somebody, and Rufe is so simple, and his wife so serious, that they tempt me beyond endurance. And, after all, it is only tit for tat. He never lets a chance slip o' preachin' to me, and I dunno see why I shouldna get a laugh out of him as often as I con. He wouldna know he had a brother if I didna stir him up now and again. It's my way of returnin' good for evil."

"I don't see the appositeness of that last remark. I suppose it's intended to be witty, but I cannot see it."

"Well, miss, if Nature hanno supplied you wi' the right kind of understanding, I canna help it. I have long learnt that if folks binna as bright in the upper storey as they might ha' been, it binna any good blaming 'em, any more than if they've one leg longer than another, or two thumbs o' one hand and none on t'other."

CHAPTER XI.

JOE AT THE FLOWER SHOW.

"Flowers are the thoughts of God translated into form and colour."—R.W.

ON the day of the annual Flower Show, in which the events described in the previous chapter transpired, the village of Summerton was gay with bunting, and the air was filled with the music of the bells and the strains of a brass band. The farmers in their Sunday clothes, with their wives and daughters bedecked with feathers and ribbons, were all driving to one centre, laughing and joking with each other by the way.

The Committee had been fortunate in getting the Hon. Hugh Fitzmorten, a representative of his Majesty's Government, and a member for the adjoining county, to open the Show, and he was undertood to be a great friend of the Prime Minister. In appearance he was six feet tall and monstrously thin, so that Joe Wentworth declared "he threw a shadow like a hayfork wi' a top hat on." But he had an eloquent tongue, and seemed able to coin apt and witty phrases at will. He had a very genuine interest in social reform, though his ignorance of horticulture was colossal, as the Vicar and Rufus Wentworth soon discovered when they showed him round the exhibits. He, however, made no pretensions to knowledge he did not possess, and had come down because Bedford

Bird, the Vicar, was an old friend of his father's, and had known him from his earliest childhood.

"I think I can tell a cabbage from a cauliflower," he said, "but that is the extent of my knowledge. I am the last man to discharge such duties as lie before me to-day. I shall be sure to say something that is absurd. I have been studying Blue Books instead of roses, and Acts of Parliament instead of green peas, ever since I left the University, where I studied mathematics for a pastime and phonetics as a hobby."

"You'll get through all right," said the Vicar cheerfully. "Talk in generalities and you will avoid the rocks."

"That's the way the preachers do in this place," said Joe Wentworth, "so that the Vicar is only advising what he practises himself, and our Rufe, who is a big man among the Methodists, binna much better."

"However true that may be of the preachers," replied the Vicar with a smile, "nobody would ever think of bringing that charge against our friend here. He errs, if he can err at all, on the other side."

"Oh, Mr. Wentworth and I are old acquaintances," replied Fitzmorten. "I was introduced to him by my friend Lord Harringay, and we have had at least a couple of transactions in horse dealing together."

"To our mutual satisfaction, I hope," rejoined Joe. "I made a few pounds out of you, and you got a couple of hunters that a king might be proud to ride."

"Quite so," rejoined the other; "though I'm ashamed to say I have not used them so much as I should. I have been too busy with other matters."

"Aye," replied Joe. "You Parliament chaps have a big job on. Let me see, you've about six hundred millions of the country's money to spend before you con be said to ha' done your duty."

"I hope you don't think the only thing we do is to spend money, Mr. Wentworth?" replied the member with a smile. "I can assure you that the duties we have to perform are often very arduous and perplexing."

"Aye, I heard of an M.P. who had to worry through three dinners of nine courses every neet, wi' the result that in three months his tailor had to buy a longer tape to get his measure for a new waistcoat. But it dunno seem to ha' that effect on you," he added, eyeing critically the attenuated frame of the right honourable; "either you dunno eat much, or it dunno do you much good. Sometimes food runs to fatness, and sometimes to wordiness. I should think from lookin' at you, and reading one of your speeches, it runs itself out in speechifying in your case."

"You must excuse my brother, sir," said Rufus apologetically. "He does not mean to be rude, but he is given to overstepping the bounds of propriety in his speech."

"Lawks!" exclaimed Joe, "listen to our Rufe! 'Given to o'erstepping the bounds of propriety'! That's good, that is. It is like a sentence taken from one of his Sunday sermons, or stolen from an advertisement of somebody's soothing syrup. But here comes the band. They are playin' as if they were tryin' to blow their instruments inside out. There is Oxenby, the drummer, goin' for it eyes and limbs, as if he meant to knock the end in. I like to see fellows who, when they are on a job, put all they have into it. I'll say this for 'em, there binna any band in the county that spends as much wind on one tune as this one."

"Oh, well, you must not be too critical, Joe.

Remember they are only working men," replied Rufus, "who have but little spare time to devote to the study of music. I think, all things considered, their performance is highly creditable to them."

"So do I," said Joe; "and if some other folks I know would use their wind in blowing a trombone, instead of lecturin' folk who dunno need it, about 'o'erstepping the bounds of propriety,' it would be an advantage. But, look here, Rufe, if the right honourable gentleman on my right is as ignorant as he says he is—and I for one take his word for it—you might be spendin' the time between now and lunch in givin' him a few hints. Tell him how you fake up a second-class rose to make it look a 'nonsuch,' and what kind of dodges you resort to in order to get a first prize wi' poor grapes. You wouldna think it, sir, to look at him," said Joe, addressing the Hon. Hugh Fitzmorten, "nobody knows better than Rufe how to draw a feather o'er the eyes of the judges."

"Come, come, Mr. Wentworth," said the Vicar, who had left the group early in the conversation, and had returned just in time to hear the last remark, "we cannot have you taking away the good name of the parish in that manner. I have pleasure in bearing my testimony that during the whole of my life I have never met with a more honourable man than your brother."

"I conno help that, Vicar," retorted Joe; "I am not responsible for the kind of company you've kept."

"Leave him alone, sir," said Rufus. "He is in one of his tantalising moods this morning. He will be better when he has had his lunch."

"I shall," rejoined Joe emphatically. "And I hope neither you nor the Vicar will 'o'erstep the bounds of propriety' when you get to the table. It's not the first time I've had to warn you."

Rufus's unfortunate phrase seemed to have greatly upset Joe, and accounted for the acidity of his remarks, but he speedily got over it, and at the luncheon table was again the centre of a constant ripple of fun and merriment.

Mr. Wentworth is a remarkable man," said Hugh Fitzmorten to the Vicar afterwards. "He is certainly the most original character I have met for a long time."

"Yes, he is quite a study," was the reply. "I am both amused and puzzled with him. He deliberately tries to annoy people one moment, and the next will do anything to render them a service. He plays all sorts of jokes, such as irresponsible schoolboys might indulge in, yet, I verily believe, he does more kindnesses, excepting his brother Rufus, than any other man in the parish. He has not the solidity of goodness that his brother has, but now and then he manifests a practical good sense that is surprising. I believe, for example, this Flower Show was his idea, though he fastens it upon his brother, as, indeed, he does all his best actions. At first I thought but slightingly both of his mental ability and of his moral character, but I have long since discovered that I made a big mistake. He is a diamond in the rough, with all its corners and angles, but a diamond nevertheless."

* * * * *

Joe was out for a high day, and he got it. He had a joke for everybody, and was the centre of all the merriment in the Show. After the awards were made, he "ragged the judges," and said that they must ha' put on their wives' spectacles instead of their own. He got the band to play a tune three times over—a tune which he knew the Vicar particularly

disliked, and while the instrumentalists were having luncheon he quietly plugged the leading cornet with wads of paper and put it out of action for a couple of hours. He declared he was out for a day's enjoyment and he was going to have it. He set the boys running races for sixpences, and the girls all skipping, and was for a couple of hours the centre of a shouting, scrambling crowd of happy youngsters, who certainly enjoyed themselves to the top of their bent. He gathered the old men and women together, and offered half a pound of tobacco and a pound of tea to the old couple who would sing the best duet, and half a crown for the best solo. Indeed, there seemed no end either to his resourcefulness or his generosity. At six o'clock he had promised Sam should drive Fitzmorten to Whitehurst, in order to catch the express for London. Promptly at the hour Sam appeared with a rakish-looking horse in a high-wheeled gig.

"Get out, Sam," exclaimed his master, "I'm going myself. I'm tired of seein' big cabbages and prize pinks. It's reet enough for a change, but a fortneet of it would drive me crazy. You con stop here till I come back. And mind you behave yourself, and dunno get flirtin' wi' the girls, or I'll tell your wife. You conno help bein' a beauty, but you con help misusing your gifts. I'll tell our Rufe to keep an eye upon you; and here is half a crown to pay for thirty shies at the cocoanuts and six rides on the hobby horses; but if you try the hosses, mind you dunno fall off. It would be a job if you broke your leg. Now, sir," he said to the right honourable, "jump in, and we will see whether this hoss conno win a prize for doin' five miles under record time. Let go his head, Sam! Git! old man, and show this gentleman from London what the Red Acres' hosses can do."

After getting out of the village, Joe turned to his fellow-passenger and asked, "Are you married, sir?"

"Yes."

"Any bairns?"

"Yes; two boys."

"Well, then, the succession is secured in any case. Have you any objection to your wife bein' left a widow?"

"Certainly I have," replied Fitzmorten. "But why do you ask?"

"Well, this hoss is just the worst tempered brute I have in my stables. He kicked the front out of a gig last week, and got his leg o'er the shafts of my best trap the week before. Seemed to imagine he could spring out of the harness if he only jumped high enough. I've only had him three weeks, and we've had an accident of one kind or another wi' him every time we have had him out. It's about time that he was taught good behaviour, and I thought I couldna do better than gi' him a lesson when I had a distinguished member of the Government present to witness the fun. It seems a good opportunity, dunno it, to practise?"

"Mr. Wentworth," replied Fitzmorten, "I'm a bit nervous with horses myself. You see, I——"

"That's always a great mistake," Joe exclaimed, before the other could finish his speech. "There binna any surer way of inviting disaster than losin' your nerve. Well, just howd fast wi' your feet and hands, and grit your teeth. If you are very freetened, lie down in the bottom of the trap, for there is goin' to be some fun. That hoss means mischief, as sure as beans binna peas. I saw it in his eye when he came up. I expect Sam has been givin' him some ginger. Whoa, there!" he cried, slyly touching the horse on the flank with the whip, at which the huge

beast winced, the iron shoes striking sparks out of the ground as he launched out fiercely with his hind legs. Then he reared straight up, pawing the air with his front hoofs, while he threw flecks of foam from his mouth as he madly tossed his head.

"It's a good job he conno rear and kick at the same time!" ejaculated Joe. "He's as mad as a Jew who has given five good sovereigns for a bad five pound note. Now he and I are goin' to settle once and for ever the question who is to be master. If I get smashed, tell our Rufe I leave him a lock of my hair, and Gwen con have my new pocket knife. All the rest of my belongings I leave to the poor orphans of defunct members of the House of Lords. Git, you brute!" The whip cracked and then caught the horse a sharp flick across the ears. If he was angry before, he was full of blind rage now. Dropping his head down to his knees, he struck out viciously with his hind legs, beating a tattoo against the front of the vehicle. Wood and iron could not stand it, and the panels went flying in splinters around the heads of the occupants.

"Duck your head!" cried Joe to his fellow-traveller. "He's warming to it now, and so am I."

Thrice the whip came with all the strength of the driver's sinewy arm across the horse's flank. Then, with a scream of rage and pain he bolted.

It took all the farmer's coolness and strength, practised as he was, to guide the mad beast. During the conflict between man and horse Hugh Fitzmorten had sat quite still, but his lips were white, and his hands trembled as he gripped the side of the gig. For a mile the horse went at a runaway pace, and just as Fitzmorten was beginning to breathe more freely and to think the worst was over, the animal

suddenly swerved from the middle of the road to the side. One wheel of the gig went tottering over a deep ditch, and the right honourable member was sent flying over the hedge into a ploughed field, where he comfortably landed on his hands and knees. The gig wobbled, the wheel spun round, when Joe deftly gave the right hand rein a sudden switch, and the horse sprang again in the other direction and saved gig and driver from a more serious accident. Again the horse reared and danced about the road for a few moments, until at length Joe brought him to a dead standstill.

"Hallo!" he cried, standing up to get a glimpse of his companion, "I hope you binna hurt?" he shouted, catching sight of him rising from his knees.

"No. I'm not much the worse, thank you," he replied. "I'll walk along to the gate."

"He dunno seem much in a blue funk," said Joe to himself. "He's got the good owd English blood in him, I think. You shouldna ha' left your seat wi'oot my permission," he said as Fitzmorten joined him. "I expect you will want to walk now?"

"No. I'll confess at first I did feel a bit nervous," he replied. "But I've watched your handling of that horse with great admiration. If you risk it again, so will I."

"Good for you!" exclaimed Joe. "Jump in, sir. I guess we have got a few minutes' lost time to make up if you are to catch that train. And this hoss has got to do it, or I'll know the reason why. But I fancy he will have grown tired of his tricks by this. Now then, Captain, git!"

The horse seemed to understand that he was mastered, for he simply settled down to a long, swinging trot that seemed almost to devour the distance,

and soon the first houses of the town appeared in view.

"He's got good stuff in him," said Joe, "and he'll pay for his training. The worst thing about him is his awkward gait. He flings his hoofs about like a sixteen stone woman in a country dance. I like to see a hoss that just makes you think all his joints are made of elastic, and puts his feets down wi' an easy, graceful spring. That is the difference between Briton and this hoss. Come over to my place some time and I'll show you a hoss that puts his feet down as straight and as regular as a good player puts his fingers on a piano, and who wouldna think of throwin' you over the hedge if there happened to ha' been a bit of difference between you. But you have torn your trousers. I'm sorry, very sorry, but I couldna catch you by the feet and howd the hoss at the same time, and you didna give me any warning that you were going."

"I think you did very well. Very well, indeed. As for my trousers, they can be mended, and my knee has got a scratch and is a bit stiff; but it will be all right to-morrow. I really escaped remarkably well, considering."

"Well, I'll say this for you—you dunno lack pluck. I hanno a vote in your constituency, but when the next election comes, if a hoss and trap, or maybe two, would be of any use, let me know."

"Thank you, Mr. Wentworth; I shall not forget your promise, and shall certainly take advantage of it."

"Well, there is this difference between me and the average member of Parliament," said Joe. "I make few promises, but I keep 'em. They make a good many, and dunno keep any. But here is the station. We ha' done it in three minutes over Briton's time, and his time is the best on record."

CHAPTER XII.

THE RINDERPEST.

"Some men are so sharp they cut off their own fingers and then blame the knife."—J. W.

THE rinderpest had made its appearance in the neighbourhood of Summerton, and the authorities were taking stringent measures to stamp out the disease. The inspector for Whitehurst district was a peculiarly pompous man, who being dressed in a little official authority, made himself very obnoxious to the farmers by his overbearing manner and high-handed methods. Wherever there was a case of plague, the whole stock was immediately slaughtered, and a very small allowance made per head by the Government for the cattle thus destroyed. This meant ruin for some of the poorer farmers, and it was not rendered easier for them by this offensive official who carried out the instructions. At length the dreaded disease made its appearance on the adjoining farm to the Red Acres, kept by a widow named Hudson, who was in straitened circumstances. Wentworth had assisted her many times both by his counsel and money, to tide over her temporary difficulties, and she sent for him after having notified the officer, Mr. Hardy.

Joe, whose knowledge of cattle was very considerable, inspected the animal which was infected, and had not the slightest doubt that it was a case of

rinderpest, and had the animal slaughtered forthwith. Finding that Mrs. Hudson had a number of fine heifers which had not been in contact with the cow, he had them immediately driven into his own fields, knowing, of course, that he was acting in direct contravention of the law.

"It won't be any use, Mr. Wentworth," said the owner. "Hardy is acquainted with how many head of cattle I've got, and he will want to know what has become of the young stock. He will have the lot. Oh, dear! I shall be ruined!" The poor woman burst into tears at the dismal prospect before her.

"Well, dunno let it rain till the thunder comes," he replied; "it's a waste of beauty and good salt water. How much do you value that stock at, supposing you were taking them to the market?"

"Well," she replied, "Mr. Burns offered me one hundred and forty-five pounds for them a month ago. I wish I had let 'em go, but I thought it would pay me to keep them."

"And you were reet. The value I should place on 'em would be one hundred and sixty pounds, and then there would be a decent chance of profit for the buyer. Well, ma'am, seein' I'm takin' some risk both wi' my own cattle and wi' Hardy, I ought to have somethin' as a set-off against it, and so I'll gi' you £159 19s. 10½d. for 'em. That will leave me three-ha'pence for the risk and trouble."

"No, Mr. Wentworth," she replied, "if you take them you shall have them for one hundred and thirty pounds. It would be such a relief to have them off my hands, and I really need the money."

"If I take them, ma'am, I take them at my own price. If our Rufe heard I'd taken advantage of a bit of trouble to make a few extra pounds out of a

widow woman I'd never hear the last of it. You've no idea, ma'am, what a life he leads me. He worries me like a dog worrying a bone."

"But what if Hardy wants to know where they are?"

"Tell him you sold 'em to me. You needna say when, and if he wants further particulars, send him to the Red Acres."

"I cannot tell you, Mr. Wentworth, how——"

"Then dunno try, ma'am," broke in Joe. "I'll ha' my value out of that cattle, either in fun or money, depend on it. Keep a stiff upper lip and dunno worry any more than you con help, and we shall get through yet. But send John over wi' those beasts at once to my place. It would never do for Hardy to find 'em in your fields."

When Joe arrived home the cattle were being driven into his yard, and forthwith he had them distributed all over his farm. At four o'clock in the afternoon Hardy drove up, and Joe went out to him.

"Hallo, Bob!" he exclaimed, knowing well how the inspector hated to be called by that name; "come out for an airing, eh? or maybe you want to buy a hunter? I hear you've been doing well lately."

"No, sir," replied the other, drawing himself up in his most pompous manner and putting on his official air. "I learn, Mr. Wentworth, that you have very recently bought some cattle from Mrs. Hudson."

"Who towd you that? Some busybody, I reckon. That is the wurst of livin' in a place where the foaks mind their neighbour's business fust and their own after. If you want to buy those cattle I'll let you have 'em cheap. I reckon Selina had me on the blind side when she sold me those beasts. But when you are bargainin' wi' a bonnie young widow, you canno

screw her down much. She kind o' throws a glamour o'er you, and you feel a flusterment under the second button of your waistcoat."

"I am not buying any cattle, Mr. Wentworth. I've come to see that they are free from infection. I'll thank you, sir, to show them to me."

"Oh, they are all reet. You con take my word for it. I'll guarantee they are all sound in wind and limb."

"I'm sorry I cannot take your word for it. It is my duty to see them myself."

"I like a chap that does his duty and dunno brag about it," replied the farmer. "It binna every official that is anxious about that so much, if only he gets his salary. I'm that way myself; if I dunno do my duty I've a conscience that worries me as bad as a weazel worries a rabbit. Now about those cattle. I didna know you were coming or I might have ordered things a bit different. You see, I've kind of distributed them. One is in the byre, because she is a bit lame, but two are in the meadow, Stourbridge way; and two are in a four-acre croft I have at Summerton, and the other one is a bit nearer, but a good walk from here. Which will you see first?"

"I think I will see the one in the shed, and then, if you will let a lad go with me and show me the road I will drive round and see the others."

"Drive!" exclaimed Joe. "You conno very well. It is cross country, and the best way is to go on Shanks's pony. It is a pretty stiffish walk, but to a gentleman in the discharge of his duty it won't appear so. I'll get Sam to go round with you. I'd go myself, but I am a bit busy, and am expectin' a gentleman who wants to buy a couple of horses. Here, Sam," he cried to the head groom, "this gentleman wants to see the

heifers in the Hayes field and those in the croft, and the one in the One Oak Meadow. It binna your job, I know; but I conno go myself, and all the other men are away in one place or another. You see, you didna let us know you were comin'," he continued, turning to Hardy, "or we might ha' had 'em all on the lawn in front of the house."

"What about the one you have here, Mr. Wentworth?" asked Hardy, observing that Joe had given no orders concerning that one, and was suspicious accordingly.

"Oh, aye! Take him to the cowshed, but be caerful, Old Ben, the bulldog, is shut up in the byre, and he hates strangers about the place. He is gettin' a bit queer in his temper and is not to be trusted. Whatever you do, dunno strike at him, or he'll tear you to pieces. If he takes a fancy to you it will be all reet, but if he begins to show his teeth, then clear."

Hardy, who, truth to tell, was a bit of a coward, would have gladly excused himself from going to see the heifer under these circumstances, but he had made so great a parade of doing his duty that he could not very well withdraw now.

As he and Sam crossed the yard he asked, "Is the dog very savage?"

"He's a brute!" replied Sam, truthfully enough. "The less you've to do wi' him, the better. The fact is, I dunno like going into that byre when he's there, and I dunno think I shall. I'll open the door, but you mon go yourself. I've no notion of havin' a piece taken out of my leg for you or Mr. Wentworth either. I'm not paid to be gnawed at by a bulldog."

When they reached the byre door Sam threw it open, and there, lying on a heap of straw, was Ben,

having been instructed by his master to mind an old coat which he had thrown down beside him. The dog was harmless enough, unless anyone approached an object he had been specially left to guard, and then he would growl and show his teeth ominously to warn off any intruders. As a matter of fact, he had never been known to bite anyone.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Sam, "if that dog hanno got my coat!" and forthwith got a pitchfork and began to endeavour to pull it towards him. Instantly there was an ominous growl, his teeth gleamed, and he slowly rose and stared at the intruders.

Hardy waited for no more, but incontinently bolted. Sam grinned, slammed the door to, and followed. He overtook the inspector on the farther side of the yard.

"Good job you didn't stop, sir. That dog meant mischief. I only got the door shut just in time. He intended having a bite, sure enough."

"I wonder Wentworth keeps such a brute," retorted Hardy. "I'd shoot him if he was mine."

"So would I," rejoined Sam, "but the boss binna like anybody else. He likes savage animals. A hoss dunno interest him unless he tries to kick the stars out of the sky, and we've a bull or two about the place that would pitch a man into the middle of next month as soon as look at him. I hope there binna one in the meadows wi' the heifers. If there is, you con go if you like, but I shall sit on the gate and watch the fun."

Here was fresh food upon which to feed his fears. Hardy already had begun to suspect that he was being duped, but, swallowing his chagrin, he accompanied Sam across the orchard and into the adjoining meadow.

They reached the hedge on the farthest side of the field, and Sam, saying the gate was at the other end, scrambled through a thin place in the briars, and Hardy followed. Either by accident or design, a branch of a thorn bush Sam was holding back slipped through his fingers and caught Hardy across the face, knocking off his bowler hat and sending it flying into the ditch full of mud. Hardy with difficulty recovered it, and was by this time thoroughly angry.

"Look here! why did you do that?" he exclaimed.

"Sorry," replied Sam. "Accidents will happen in the best regulated families. I hope it didna hurt you much. A thorn ran into my finger and I let go that bough before I knew it was gone."

"It has spoiled my hat, and it might have blinded me."

"It might," replied Sam cheerfully. "However, it hanno, so that is something to be thankful for. Bit hardish walkin' here, sir. I rather thought it would be. It's awfully clapsy."

Sam might well say so. The ground was sodden and the two men sank into it at every step. Sam kept plodding away, however, pointing out to his companion a ridge that seemed better walking than the rest, but the farther they went the worse it became.

"Look here!" exclaimed Hardy, "I'm going back. I've had enough of this!"

"So have I," replied Sam. "I wouldna ha' come so far wi' anybody else. I'm sorry we didna go the long way round. But we are nearly half-way across now, and we might as well finish it."

At length the field was crossed, and then Sam led the way at a rattling pace across hedge and ditch,

till Hardy began to tire. "Is it far?" he asked at length.

"A goodish distance yet. But we shanno be so very long in gettin' there at this pace."

Quite half an hour after they arrived at a meadow, in which there were a score of cattle.

"There they are," said Sam; "and, dash my buttons! if the roan bull binna under the hedge yonder. I binna goin' any further. I hanno made arrangements to leave my wife a widow yet."

"Which are the two heifers Mr. Wentworth bought off Mrs. Hudson?"

"Dunno ax me," replied Sam; "I dunno know much about cows. Hosses is my department. I'll undertake to tell you anythin' about hosses from hoof to ears, but I con hardly tell one cow from another."

"Jolly awkward!" exclaimed Hardy. "How am I to know which is which? I've a good mind to condemn the lot. It's a nasty trick Wentworth has served me."

"Trick?" exclaimed Sam. "What trick? The boss hardly knows his own cows. Leaves it all to John. So there is plenty of butter and cheese, he dunno care a fiddler's thumb about cows. Like me, he is a hossman."

"But you don't mean to say that you are not going with me?" Hardy said as he climbed the gate. "It seems to me that you are somewhat of a coward."

"I am—where bulls are concerned," replied Sam. "Besides, that roan is one of the wurst I ever set eyes on. I binna paid for this job. I'm doing it for fun—I mean, to oblige."

"I'll give you half a crown if you will go with me and drive the cattle into yon corner, so that I can get a good look at them."

"Not for a wheelbarrow full of half-crowns," replied

Sam. "And if you take my tip you wonno go in either. I wonno split; but if I was you I should report all O.K., and say no more about it. I'm blest if that bull hanno got his eye on you already. See! he is looking this way. It's to be hoped you've made your will, sir."

"I don't like to be beaten," said Hardy. "I wish I had brought a walking stick, though. However, I'm going over in any case."

"Better leave your valuables with me. There binna any sense in losing both your life and property."

"Humph!" exclaimed Hardy angrily, as he climbed over the gate, and began to walk slowly towards the cattle.

Sam climbed on the gate, and directly Hardy's back was turned, began to wave his red cotton handkerchief. The cattle lifted their heads, and the bull gave a roar and began to paw the ground. Hardy stopped, and having stood for a few minutes surveying the cattle in the distance, retraced his steps, while the bull, seeing him retiring, began to walk towards him, and finally commenced to run. So did Hardy. In a few steps he was at the gate, and Sam seized his arms and helped him over.

"What did I tell you, sir? It's a good job you didna get any further, or I should ha' had to borrow a clothes basket to take you home in."

Hardy was very footsore and weary when, as night fell, he arrived at the Red Acres, for Sam had lost his way, or professed to do so, and had added a couple of unnecessary miles to the journey.

"Well?" said Joe. "Glad to see you back. Thought you two must ha' gone off on the spree. Found the cattle all reet, I hope? Come in and ha' some supper."

"Mr. Wentworth," said Hardy, "I am not going to

have either bite or sup at your expense. If I told you what I thought of you, you would not be flattered."

"Spit it out," said Joe. "I like to hear a man talk red English. Fire away! I shanno faint."

"No, sir," replied Hardy. "Everybody knows you are a trickster; but maybe I shall be even with you yet. So I'll bid you good-night."

"Seems huffed, Sam," said Joe, as the inspector drove away. "Come in and ha' your supper, and tell me what has happened. I'm a bit afraid you hanno behaved nicely to the gentleman—eh, Sam?"

There was huge merriment as Sam told his story over the supper table, and something which looked suspiciously like a half-sovereign lay in the palm of his hand as he left for home in great good humour.

Three days after the inspector drove up again to the Red Acres. "Mr. Wentworth, I understood you to say those two heifers in the little meadow near the station at Summerton are yours."

"I did say so," he replied. "Why?"

"I feel sure one of them has caught the rinderpest. I have scheduled them both to be destroyed. They must be shot forthwith."

"Am sorry," replied Joe. "I never like a neighbour to suffer. I've sold those heifers the day before yesterday."

"To whom?" asked the inspector. "In any case they will have to be slaughtered."

"To Herbert, of Leyton. I'm very sorry for him, poor fellow! It has just come into my head that he married a relation of yours—a sister, wonno it? Hope it wonno disturb family relations, but I know you are a man to do your duty at all costs."

What the inspector said is not for these pages.

"Seems as though he had the rinderpest himself," said Joe to his housekeeper.

The cattle were not destroyed, for the inspector found that he had been mistaken in his opinion that they were victims of the plague. When the plague scare was over Joe sold the remainder of the heifers, and having made more out of the transaction than he bargained for, sent an additional ten pounds to Mrs. Hudson, saying "that he had more than ten pounds' worth of fun out of the transaction, and he didna want paying twice over."

CHAPTER XIII.

JOE AS A HERO.

"The safest thing wi' a mad dog is to cut off his tail close behind his ears."—J. W.

RUFUS WENTWORTH'S rosery was a sight which tempted many pilgrims to walk from Whitehurst, five long miles, in order to see it. It was always open, and the public were welcome to go through at leisure, and nearly always they carried away some of its floral treasures, for the owner of it was lavish in his generosity. He was one day sitting reading a new book, written by his friend the Dean of Alchester, on "Rose Culture," and was greatly enjoying it, when he was not a little embarassed to find his own name mentioned in it, as one of the first rosarians of the country.

"He does me too much credit," he said. "He has forgotten more than I ever knew, but it is very kind of him—very kind. I mon write and thank him. Lucy and Gwen will be pleased. I mon buy a few copies, and give one to Joe and one to the minister."

When Joe's copy arrived by post one morning, "With the best wishes of his brother," Joe examined it curiously, and then said, "I wonder what's the matter wi' Rufe. He must have got a notion to improve my education. I binna goin' to grow roses—at least, not of the sort that want a lot of looking after. I've summat better to do wi' my time. If he'd sent me a

book on 'How to Grow Cabbages,' or, 'How to Rear Pigs,' or 'How to Make Hens Lay Four Times a Day,' there would ha' bin some sense in it. You con ha' it, miss. Accordin' to the postage it weighs four ounces, so you con use it to weigh butter wi', and if you are short of curl papers I shanno say much if you take out a leaf here and there. Only leave the pictures. They'll do to look at on a wet day."

"For shame!" exclaimed Miss Davies. "It is a beautiful book. You don't deserve to have presents sent you. But, see! here is a book mark. There must be something your brother wishes you to see."

"Read up, Lydia. And if you see me putting my fingers in my ears you'll know you have reached the unbearable point."

"Why!" she exclaimed, "here are two whole pages about your brother and his roses."

"About our Rufe? Nonsense! Nobody would put him in a book."

"But it is so, and the author says that he is not only a great authority on roses, but is a very unique and beautiful character."

"A pretty lot he knows. I shall ha' to write and tell him a few things. But Rufe will go about wi' his hat three inches above his head after this. He wonno own his poor relations."

"You are talking nonsense," replied Miss Davies. "Your brother has too much sense to be spoiled by that or anything else—and you know it."

"It's always the way. Nobody can say anythin' agin Rufe anywhere within ten miles of Summerton; but anybody con say what they like about me, and nobody will go to the trouble to deny it. I believe if it was in the papers that I cut my throat and then murdered everybody at the Red Acres after I was

dead, they would say, 'Oh, it's what we expected. It's just like him.'"

"Hallo, Rufe," he said later in the day, when he drove up to the rosary, "so you've bin and disgraced the name of Wentworth, and got yourself put in a book! Man! I'm ashamed of you!"

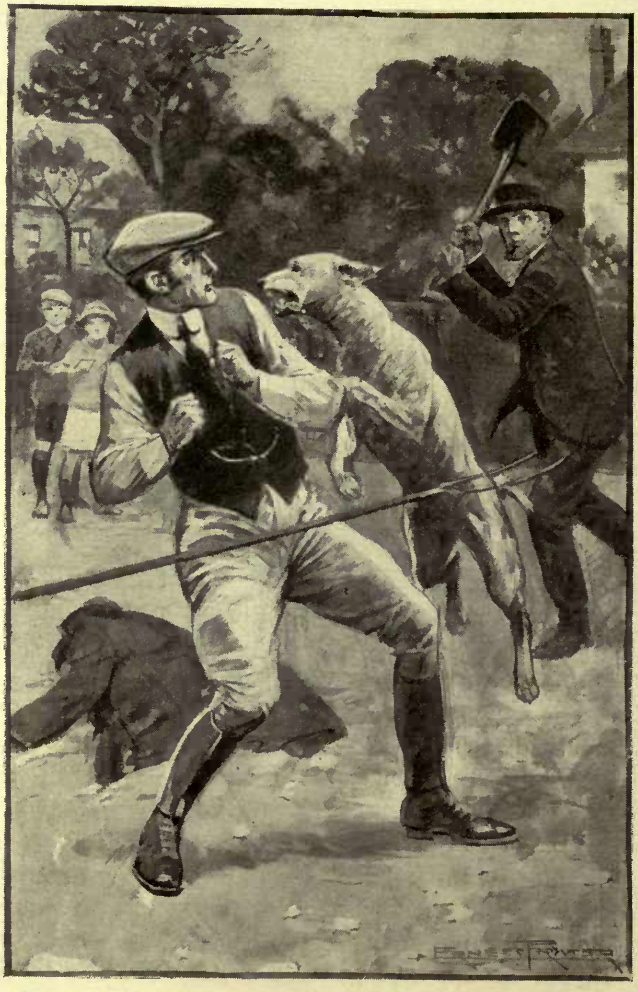
"I'm a bit ashamed of myself," replied Rufus. "I binna worthy of all the good things the Dean says about me."

"Oh, well, I'm glad you own up. I binna going to let it make any difference between us. I shall still acknowledge you as my brother in public, and I wonno tell foaks that the Dean has been put up to write that eulogy. There are things in a family which ought to be kept within its own circle. But if you do it again I'll not say what will happen."

Just then loud shouting was heard outside, and the brothers hurried to the gate to see what was the matter. A dog was running down the street, his tongue out, his mouth full of froth, and cries of "Mad dog!" were heard from the crowd who were following it armed with sticks and farm implements of various kinds.

"Fetch your gun!" Joe shouted to his brother. "Quick!"

"It binna loaded, and I've got no shot or powder," was the reply. Just at this moment two little children, hand in hand, turned a corner of the street, and were toddling in the direction from which the mad dog was coming. Rufus uttered a cry of alarm, and, seizing a hay fork which lay near, was hastily opening the gate to go to the defence of the children. In a twinkle Joe's sinewy arms were around him and his knee planted in the small of his back, and Rufus



The farmer instinctively drew back, dropping his fork, and the brute's teeth snapped within an inch of his face.

Face page 125.

lay on the ground, taken utterly unawares by this attack.

"No, you don't!" exclaimed Joe, snatching the fork from his hand; "this binna a job for an owd man who figures in books. You lie there, out of harm's way. The bairns binna yours, anyway."

All this had taken place in less time than it takes to tell, and the next moment the farmer was through the gate and in the street. The dog was now within a hundred yards of the children, and a hoarse cry of alarm came from the lips of the helpless crowd near enough to see the danger, but not near enough to prevent it. Joe, however, was only about thirty yards away, and was sprinting in a fashion that would have done credit to a younger man. He had slipped off his coat as he ran, and was holding it in one hand and the fork in the other.

In a trice he had placed himself between the children and the dog, who, with gleaming teeth and fiery eyes, was coming straight for them. Joe had stopped running and stood awaiting the attack.

The next moment the dog launched itself open-mouthed at him. Joe dashed his coat over the dog's head, and, before it could disentangle itself, brought the fork down on its back with his full strength.

The dog turned, and, before Joe could strike again, sprang straight at his throat. The farmer instinctively drew back, dropping his fork, and the brute's teeth snapped within an inch of his face. He was preparing for another spring, when Rufus, who had by this time come up, smote it on the head with a spade he had seized as the only possible weapon at hand, and his blow was the final one, for it killed it.

"Well done, Rufe!" exclaimed Joe. "You brought

an end to his career just in the nick of time. I began to think I was likely to finish my days in a mad house."

"Thank the Lord!" exclaimed Rufus, grasping his brother's hand, while the tears filled his eyes; "and you have saved the bonnie bairns."

"I saved the bairns?" retorted Joe. "Well, I like that. Who was it that boxed that dog's ears wi' a spade so hard that it knocked its brains out?"

"If it hadna bin for you," said Rufus, "those children would ha' bin bitten as sure as fate—and you know it."

By this time the crowd had come up, and the two brothers were in danger of being overwhelmed by congratulations. The people surrounded them, and in spite of Joe's protestations that "it was all our Rufe," the farmer came in for the lion's share of the credit, as indeed he deserved it.

Meantime the nurse of the two children had learnt of the danger and escape through the intervention of the two brothers, and came amidst the crowd, and began to pour out her gratitude in the warmest terms, and, indeed, seemed as though she would like to have embraced them both.

"Here, miss," said Joe, as she seized his hand and kissed it again and again, "I really conno allow this. I'm a poor unprotected bachelor, and I dunno know how to take care of myself. If you want to kiss somebody, go for Rufe. He's hardened to it, and wonno blush, and you con settle it wi' his wife after. But I dunno see anything to make so much fuss about. Two able-bodied men, wi' the aid of a hay fork and a shovel, kill a dog that had gone wrong in its upper storey. We might ha' killed a wild elephant, or a rampin', raging lion, for the noise you make about it. Come along, Rufe, let us go and have a

cup of tea. We ha' earned that anyway; and perhaps some of you fellows who hanno done a job for the last fortneet will bury that carcass out of seet."

But not so easily did the brothers escape being lionised; for the crowd increased, and they followed them to Rufe's house, where, first of all, they sang "For he's a jolly good fellow," and then gave three hearty cheers.

"Rufe," said Joe, "get your garden hose. I'll scatter 'em; see if I dunno!"

"No, no," replied Rufus. "They mean it all in kindness and goodwill. Here comes the Vicar."

"Let me out. This is no place for a modest man like me. I dunno want any parsons about me. I'm neither sick nor dying."

"It's too late," his brother replied; "you are caught this time."

"Aye, like a fox in a trap; but, remember, like a fox, I con turn and fight."

The Vicar at this moment entered. He had evidently hurried, and his breath was coming thick and fast.

"Hallo, Vicar!" cried Joe, "what's up? Has our Rufe bin sheep stealing? I hope you've come to gi' him a good blowin' up. If he dunno deserve it now he will directly; so it's all the same. Go for him, and I'll back you!"

"Mr. Wentworth, I've hurried down to say——"

"So I see you have," Joe interrupted, "and your blow bellows hanno got into workin' order again. But you'll get your wind back directly. In the meantime, I mon be going."

"Not until I have thanked you," said the Vicar. "You have done a very noble and heroic thing, and I feel proud as the Vicar of the parish to say so."

"Wrong every time. I did nothing. It was our Rufe who hit that dog on the head wi' a spade; and I'm no parishioner of yours. Reetly speaking, I belong to Stourbridge parish; but my Vicar is such a duffer that I conno stand him more than twice a year. I dunno think much to your preachin' as a rule, but, compared to his, it is beef compared to leather. If you have anything to say, you mon say it to Rufe."

"As usual," said Rufus, "he is trying to give the credit to me. Joe Wentworth, you are a shuffler—that's what you are. Vicar, I declare, if it hadna been for him those two bairns would ha' bin bitten, as sure as fate. He conno deny that!"

"Conno he? You dunno know my power of denying. I deny, anyhow, that I've got a brother that is second cousin to George Washington; for George owned up about the hatchet, but he wonno about the spade. If anybody's got to pay for killing that dog, he's the man."

"I wish, in the name of the whole village and that of the parents of the children to most sincerely thank you both. They are the children of a very dear friend of mine, who with his wife are now my guests. The little ones were playing on the lawn and must have wandered away before they were noticed. Their mother is not well to-day and had gone to lie down, and the maid was busy gathering raspberries in the garden."

"Look here, Vic., let me give you a tip," said Joe. "Dunno you tell her what has happened. If she binna well it wonno improve her to hear that her kiddies were so near being bitten, and neither Rufe nor I want any vicarage folks fussin' about us."

"You are very kind, but I fear it is too late. The maid heard of it first and ran to me, and then went

to tell her mistress. And now, if you will excuse me, I will return and put her mind at rest; but I felt my first duty, when I knew the children were safe, was to thank their protectors. The father, Captain Guest, has gone to Manchester to-day, but he is returning to-night. I have no doubt he will seek the first opportunity of thanking you in person."

"He needna come to the Red Acres, for I shanno be at home if he comes. I am thinking of going away from home for a few days if I con manage it."

"That's the first I've heard of it," said Rufus, with a smile. "Where bin you going?"

"To where men mind their own business, and women are so busy wi' their hands they hanno time to use their tongues. There binna any Methodists there, so you needna bother," replied Joe. "Good afternoon, Vicar; you've bin wastin' your time and ours as well."

"Now, Rufe, order tea. I binna going out while all those folks are standing about the street. I wish I had Briton. I'd run over half a dozen of 'em. These Summerton folks seem to have nothin' to do all day except wait till it's bedtime. They are a lazy lot."

"That is not true, and I wonno let you or anybody else run them down. They are good neighbours, and, on the whole, thrifty and industrious. As for tea, you are welcome if you will wait until Lucy and Gwen come home. They have gone out visiting the sick, but they wonno be long."

"I will wait for no gossiping women," replied Joe, who seemed in one of his most tantalising moods. "You make the fire up and I'll put the kettle on. Then you set out the crockery and I'll make the toast. I'm an expert at that; I learnt how to make it on board ship."

"I dunno see what you are in such a hurry for," said Rufus. "You've neither chick nor child, and you have got both your farm and stables in such good order that they go like clockwork, and yet you never have a moment to spare. You want more repose in your life. Time to think and meditate and pray. Folks who are always in such a hurry miss the best."

"I do my thinking on hossback. A hard trottin' hoss sets the machine going, and I think at the rate of eighty miles an hour. I meditate mostly when I'm asleep, or listening to you preaching. If I want to reckon up my profits for a month I come along to chapel and I know I shall ha' plenty of time while you are howding forth."

"Come, come, I dunno like to hear you talk like that. There are some things which ought never to be spoken about wi'oot becoming seriousness. I wish you had a bit more reverence."

"I once went to a phrenologist, and he said I had a bump of reverence as big as a pigeon's egg," rejoined Joe. "He didna know that that bump was made by a nigger throwing a cocoanut at another, and being a bad marksman, hit me instead. But yonder comes the missus and Gwen, and there binna two better looking wimmen in the Midlands. The one is like a full-blown rose and the other just like a bud opening out. It's summat to brag about, that we've got the two handsomest women and the one handsomest man in the county in our family."

"I agree about the ladies," laughingly replied Rufus; "but I dunno know about the man. I've never set up for being good looking; and as for you, nobody would claim that you were anything out of the common."

"That's because you are jealous, old man. We never do see our own relations as others see 'em."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE NEW SCHOOLMISTRESS.

"There are wenches who are so bonnie you wonder they dunno grow wings and fly away."—J. W.

THE Rev. Bedford Bird, Vicar of Summerton, was busy one day syringing his rose trees, of which he was proud, and justly so, for with the exception of Rufus Wentworth, who was the finest rosarian in the county, he had the best roses of anybody in the neighbourhood, not excepting Sir John Crookworth or Lady Wincanton.

Gardening was his one and only recreation, for he had a large and scattered parish, to the duties of which he gave himself without stint. He possessed a fine presence, a gracious personality, an almost child-like simplicity of character, and was one of Nature's gentlemen. Even Joe Wentworth, who conceived it to be his mission to criticise parsons, and lived up to it, admitted that the Vicar was a better clergyman than Summerton deserved, and that "only one man could hold a candle to him, and that was his brother Rufe."

He was carefully examining a rose, the leaves of which were literally covered with aphis, when he was startled by a voice behind him exclaiming, "That's a poor specimen, Vicar. We con do better than that at the Red Acres, where we dunno pretend to go in for anything very great in the posy line. The flowers

we like best are cauliflowers, and I'd rather see a big red cabbage than a cabbage rose any time."

"Good morning, Mr. Wentworth," replied the Vicar. "It is a pleasure to see you. You are right, sir, about these roses. We are greatly plagued with aphis this year. I saw your brother yesterday, and he was making the same complaint."

"Oh, well, Rufe's lot will lick yours into fiddlesticks. But you see Rufe is an industrious man, and dunno lie in bed until dinner time. He beats the lark in getting up, and the owl in going to bed. You see, when he does go to sleep he pays attention to it, and when he works he dunno work wi' a black coat on and starched cuffs."

"Well," replied the Vicar, "I don't know exactly who you have in your mind, but your remarks as to lying in bed don't apply to me. I am not sure," he added with a twinkle in his eye, "if I was not up before you this morning, and most other mornings, too."

"Six o'clock is my time in summer, and seven in the winter, and I'm so regular that the clock strikes just as I am puttin' my big toe into my stockings every morning."

"I was up at five this morning, and seldom am in bed after five-thirty. I like the hours of the dawn best, when the world is fresh. I think it is never so beautiful as at the sunrise."

"Oh, well," replied Joe with one of the inconsistent twists he often introduced into a conversation, "there are folks whose conscience wunno let 'em rest, and it worries 'em like a weazel worries a rabbit. They've done something bad at some time, I suppose, and if we knew all we should, perhaps, say they dunno deserve to sleep. But, Vicar, I've called to tell you

there was an accident at Malcolm Turner's farm last neet. The owd man slipped and broke his leg, and I promised his son I'd let you know. Malcolm is a decent fellow, of a sort, though the sort binna the best—always grabbin' and savin'. All he gives away is on Good Friday, and then the first to come is told he should ha' been there on the Thursday neet. He must be over ninety, and a mon's bones get a bit brittle when he is within seet of a hundred, and wunno mend very quickly."

"I'm very much obliged to you for letting me know, Mr. Wentworth. I'm very sorry to learn of the accident, and will go over at once. I'm afraid it will go hard with poor Malcolm. He is a very decent man, though he comes to church but seldom."

"Once a year," retorted Joe, "and then he goes out before the collection, if he can. His religion hanno cost him much, but I notice that often those who do least for the Church are the first to send for the parson when anything happens. They all like to travel on the 'up train,' and they enjoy it all the better if somebody else keeps the line in order."

"There is some truth, sir, in what you say. But that must not hinder either you or me from doing our duty. By that way, Mr. Wentworth, you don't happen to be driving over to Whitehurst to-day, do you?"

"No; I thought of having a day at home, squarin' up my accounts. And I owe so many, and ha' so little to pay 'em wi', I fairly dread the job. You couldna lend me a hundred pounds, could you?"

"I am very sorry, but I cannot. I have twenty pounds, I believe, in the house to which you are heartily welcome, though I expect the housekeeper will be very cross with me, for she says we need new

curtains for all the windows. Those can wait, however, if the money will help in any way."

"Nay, nay, Vicar," replied the little man, laughing heartily. "I was only joking. I con manage; if I conno, the creditors mon wait. It will do 'em good —cultivate the grace of patience, and teach 'em to trust in Providence. Besides, if I was hard up I should go to our Rufe. He is making money so fast that he con afford to buy a penn'orth of peppermints every Saturday. But what is it you want from Whitehurst, Vicar? Is it a barrel of ale, or a bottle of brandy, or an ounce of shag tobacco?"

As Mr. Bird was a teetotaler, and did not smoke, the farmer was only trying "to draw him," as he put it. But the Vicar was getting accustomed to his eccentric parishioner, and had learnt that the last thing to do was to show any signs of temper or irritation, which would greatly have pleased him. Nevertheless, he often retorted very effectively on his tormentor.

"No, sir," he replied. "If I wanted any of those things I certainly should not ask you to buy them— if I did not want the whole parish to know."

"Aye," exclaimed Joe, "I thought you were a bit too sly for that. But if it binna drink or bacca, what is it?"

"Why, this," replied the Vicar. "I had promised to meet the new schoolmistress, who is coming from Oldham to-day. Unless we fetch her she will be compelled to wait at Whitehurst for three and a half hours. Unfortunately, my pony has fallen lame, and I had thought I would walk over and explain, and then bring her on by train, but I cannot do that if I go to see poor Turner, which seems my first duty."

"You walk nearly six miles to meet a young chit

of a girl, so as to save her the trouble of waiting awhile!" exclaimed Joe. "There binna much sense or reason in that, anyhow. She'd find her way here all reet."

"Mr. Wentworth, I always hold my engagements as sacred," replied the clergyman, "and especially is that so when a lady is concerned. It is a duty we owe to the other sex."

"Who never hardly keep their engagements," rejoined the farmer. "Most of the women I know would break fifty engagements sooner than they'd break a looking glass."

"No, no; you are unjust. I have not found it so. As a clergyman, I have a profound reverence for womanhood."

"Well, look here, Vic., those accounts shall wait. I'll drive over and fetch the schoolmistress. But, mind, if I fall in love wi' her, and we get married and it dunno turn out trumps, I shall lay all the blame on you! It is putting temptation in the way of a poor innocent bachelor to send him drivin' about the country in company wi' a young and beautiful school teacher. But if you like to take the risk, so will I."

"Oh, thank you, very much. You will relieve my mind greatly if you will go. Miss Cheetham is very highly recommended to me, and I want her to get a good opinion of Summerton and its people. You know, first impressions count for much."

"It shanno be my fault if she dunno," replied Joe. "But what is she like? How am I to tell her from Eve, or Noah's wife, or Queen Esther?"

"This is a photograph of her," replied the Vicar, pulling an envelope out of his pocket. "She has quite a winsome face, I think."

"I'll take that wi' me and compare it wi' the original.

Them photographs are often very misleading. If she is as good lookin' as this, then Gwen must look to her laurels. Mon I bring her here, or what am I to do wi' her?"

"She is going to reside with Mr. Dulman. Tea will be waiting there for her. And so that she might not feel lonely, I have asked Miss Wentworth to call in and take tea with her. Miss Cheetham is about her own age, and I hope they will become companions. Again I thank you, Mr. Wentworth, for your courtesy."

"Say no more about it, or I'll draw out of the bargain. And now I mon be going. I have a hoss at the gate that dunno believe in mornin' calls. He jumped the gate out of my farmyard because the lad was so slow in opening it. And he came here as if that owd chap that keeps clergymen busy was behind him wi' a German sausage machine, and he was afraid if he didna hurry he would be on the breakfast table as best beef sausages at tenpence a pound by this time next week. There binna any music like the beatin' of a hoss's hoofs on a good road when one leg is trying to o'errun the others. I've listened to it many a time, and I'd rather hear it than a brass band wi' three big drums and six clarionets."

"Your horses and your brother's roses are the envy of the whole countryside. I often tell my clerical brethren that I have two of the most original and interesting characters in the country in my parish."

"That binna fair, Vicar. If I towd my friends what I think about your sermons you wouldna feel flattered. I dunno go blabbing tales out of school. But I con hear Neptune pawing the ground wi' his hoof. He's as tired of waitin' as I am sometimes for you to say 'Amen.'" And with this parting shot he

turned on his heels, and in a trice was in the saddle, and the Vicar soon heard the cantering of his horse along the cobble-paved street, at a pace nobody else would have dared to have ridden.

Later in the day the farmer drove up to the station at Whitehurst, to find the train was already in and a little lady, whom he at once recognised as the original of the photograph, waiting with two large boxes and a bag on the platform. He walked up to her and asked, "You bin Miss Cheetham, from Owdham, binna you? I've heard of Owdham's ruff-yeads, but yours is smooth enough, and pretty enough, too. Well, I binna the Vicar. I thought I'd better tell you, so that you wonno make any mistake. He is a bigger and better mon than I am, but I've more beauty and sense. He has gone to see an owd man who had no more gumshun than to practise tumblin' at ninety, and he broke his leg in the operation. He's very sorry he conno come himself, but he has sent me, and I'm glad to see you."

"Thank you, sir," she replied. "I began to think there had been some mistake. I have been waiting for twenty minutes."

"That binna my fault. I'm here two minutes and twenty seconds before the time he towd me. But he's a bit absent-minded, is the Vicar. I believe many a morning he forgets his breakfast, and I've known him forget his own address and send a load of coals which should ha' gone to the Vicarage to some poor man's cottage. But jump in, miss! Bin this luggage all yours?"

"Yes, sir."

"My! it's a furniture van I ought to ha' brought. I hope you binna married and got a husband hidden away in that big box. Because we are very particular about such things at Summerton."

The young lady blushed, and said "No, sir; they are books." Joe was evidently a new specimen of the *genus homme*, and a bit of a puzzle to her.

"Here, you two fellows!" he shouted to two porters. "Come and give me a hand wi' this box. It is full of dead men's brains and living men's notions, and they are always heavy. If you do the liftin', I'll do the orderin', which is a fair division of labour."

The two men readily obeyed the farmer, as he was well known not only for his jokes but also for the liberality of his tips.

"Now, miss," he said, as he took his seat by her side, after dropping a shilling into the hand of one of the men, "you are behind a hoss that has the strange conceit that there binna his equal in England. He's an Irishman, and that accounts for it. Now, Briton, show the young lady how hosses go in Dublin when they are running from a policeman. You binna afraid, are you, miss?"

"I don't know; I've never ridden in a trap before," she replied simply.

"Never ridden in a trap before!" he exclaimed incredulously. "Where on earth have you bin livin'?"

"I have lived in a town all my life, and this is the first time I've been away from home"; and something suspiciously like tears began to well up in her blue eyes.

"Well, I wouldna have believed that any young lady could ha' lived to your age wi'oot having ridden in a trap before, if you hadna towd me. Gently, Briton! We monno ha' any tricks to-day, or missie will never want to ride again, which would be a pity."

Joe, at bottom, was a very kindly man, and this confidence made his heart go out to the young girl, who for the first time was facing the hard realities of

life; and so, instead of indulging in the tricks he had promised himself on that ride, so that she would have a fine story to tell the Vicar, he steadied Briton down to a rapid trot, and kept his passenger both interested and amused all the journey by his description of the place and the people where she was going to reside.

"The village is pretty enough," he said; "but it binna a show place, except Rufe's rose garden, which looks like a field of poppies. The folks get up early and go to bed soon, and dunno work any harder when they be up than they be obliged. We ha' got a weather-cock on the church steeple which dunno turn, but we've several live ones in the church which do; so it dunno matter much. Among the girls we have one beauty and several who think they are; and among the lads we hanno any geniuses, but we have two or three who wear their hair long to look as if they are the genuine article. The Vicar is a 'non-such,' who preaches good sermons, but lives better ones. Like me, he has no wife to bother him, and, like me, he might ha' had a dozen between here and Whitehurst. He and our Rufe are both trying for the front seat in the choir above, and sometimes I think it will be a puzzle for the angels to say which is to have it. John Dulman, the man you are going to live with, it a 'come-day-go-day-God-send-Sunday' kind of fellow, who, if there was an earthquake, would sit and smoke his pipe, and wonder what all the clatter was about. His wife is a decent body, who talks more every twenty-four hours than any woman ought to do in a month. As for the rest of us, we are a mixture—good, bad, and indifferent—mostly indifferent. For myself, I am all of 'em in turns, and I'm having a 'good' spell now. Yonder is Summerton church steeple. You con see into six

counties from the top, if your eyesight is strong enough. I once saw several millions of miles from the top, but I was looking up and not around. I dunno know exactly how far it is to the evening star, but I could see that."

"I hope you have enjoyed your ride, Miss Cheetham," he said a few minutes later, as he drew up at the door of a pretty little cottage. Now, Sally," he cried to an elderly woman who had opened the door, "I've brought the schoolmistress, and you mon treat her well, because I've fallen in love wi' her. She hanno spoken a dozen words between here and Whitehurst. That's what I like about a woman—long patches of silence, wi' a word now and again, just to show she's awake."

"Ah, well, you know, Mr. Wentworth, a woman's tongue is the only weapon she's got," replied Mrs. Dulman.

"That's a great mercy for the men," he replied. "Chucks!" he added, as a young lady appeared in the doorway, "if there binna our Gwen. Miss Cheetham, let me warn you against keepin' bad company. A red Indian chief hanno as many scalps as she has broken hearts hangin' at her belt. Only last week I heard that a young man called Billy Stroud tried to drown himself in the brook because of her cruel conduct. Fortunately, there wunno more than an inch and a half of water, so it couldna be done."

"Uncle Joe!" exclaimed the young lady, "I was going to ask you to stay and have tea with us. Now I won't."

"Then I'll ask myself," said the little man, jumping out of the trap. "I get so few opportunities of having a meal at somebody else's expense I conno afford to throw one away."

CHAPTER XV.

AN IMPROMPTU DINNER.

"An untimely joke is like a bit of grit in your porridge."—R.W.

"I SAY, Vicar, can you tell me the difference between this hoss of mine and a preacher?"

Joe Wentworth was riding one day down a grass lane on his favourite horse Briton, when he met the Vicar, who was on one of his numberless visiting expeditions to his scattered parishioners.

"No, I do not think I can," replied the Vicar; "but I hope I see you well."

"As well as a man con be who has to work from six o'clock in the morning till nine at neet, and gi' to collections, pay taxes, rates, and tithes, and keep a pack of servants who eat him out of house and harbour. I've just paid the Vicar of Stourbridge his tithe, all in pennies, and it has left me as bare as a boiled chicken. And he was mightily huffy about it, too, and thought I ought to ha' changed the coppers into silver, and the silver into gold to suit his convenience. Next time I'll have all the pennies changed into half-pennies, so that he will want a wheelbarrow to trundle it home. But about that conundrum? You are not half so sharp as I thought you were, or you would have got it as easily as a lad wi' a big mouth swallows a black currant."

"I never was good at conundrums, Mr. Wentworth. It requires an intellect that quickly seizes upon

similarities and diversities to be clever at answering them."

"Dear me! And to think I had a brain like that, and didna know it!" said Joe. "I feel as though my head is swelling visibly, and my coat buttons are in danger of being burst off wi' conceit. But, seeing you dunno know I'll tell you, though I've nearly forgotten myself. The difference is, that the hoss always stops when you want him and a preacher never does. That is home made."

"You need not have told me that; it bears the brand of its maker," rejoined the Vicar. "Preachers and sermons seem among your pet aversions, Mr. Wentworth."

"There are things I like better than sermons, certainly," replied the farmer. "Among 'em I should place five-pound notes, a good hoss, and a first-class dinner. As for preachers, they are like oysters—awfully bad when they are bad, and pretty decent when they are good. But why dunno you ride, Vic., instead of walking? That cob of yours is getting too fat to waddle, and too lazy to try and overtake a snail."

"Because I really like walking. I find it tends to longevity, and that I can do my thinking much easier when walking through the lanes and fields than I can sitting in my study."

"I see," replied Joe. "It takes a bit of jerking to set your thinking machinery going, and keep it spinning. I shall remember that when I'm listening next time, and when it goes slow I shall say, 'This is where he did a bit of saunterin'"; and when it quickens up I shall picture you swinging both arms, striding away, and going as fast as a hungry lad who smells his dinner; and when it snaps off, so as I conno

follow it, I shall say, 'There is where he came to a stile or tried to jump a ditch.' It will make listening ever so much easier in the future now I know. But, look you, Vic.," he continued, pointing over a gate to where a dozen horses were grazing in a paddock, "binna yon a nice lot! There binna a hoss yonder that I would take a hundred pounds for, and there's one or two I wouldna take four times that amount."

"I don't understand much about horses, I am sorry to say, Mr. Wentworth, so that my opinion is not of any value. I've lived more amongst books than animals, and sometimes fear I am woefully out of touch with many of the interests of my parishioners in consequence."

"Of course you are," said the candid farmer. "I heard a farmer's wife say at the market the other day that you didna know curds from whey, or the taste of fresh butter from salt. Another declared she set before you some raspberry jam and you thought it was strawberry. I said that was nothing, for I once knew a chap who didna know a pig from a sheep! You see, I wanted to let you down easily, but I didna tell them that it was a poor fellow who had been in an asylum since he was a baby, because Nature had made a mistake and put his brains upside down in his head. I always stick up for my friends behind their backs, whatever I may say before their faces."

"I'm afraid I'm very unobservant of these little practical matters of life upon which so many people set great store," answered the Vicar. "I scold myself for living in a different world from many of the people, and for forgetting so many things I ought to remember."

"Well, it's vexing, but it binna a thing a mon can

remedy when he's got on the churchyard-and-glory side of fifty. And let me gi' you a piece of advice, Vic. Dunno you lie awake at neet, or go off your victuals, because of the countryside clash of a lot of talking women. They mon talk, bless 'em! for, as the hymn says, 'God hath made 'em so'; but there binna one of 'em but what thinks a whole world and a bit of another of you, and what binna be prepared to stand up and say you're the finest parson in England, wi' America thrown in. They talk about your faults among themselves, but it is only their way of showing their respect for you. I'm the only one who says what I think reet out, but I conno help it. But where bin you off to this morning?"

"I'm going to see Abram Scott's wife. She is down again with the asthma, I am told. And then I thought I would go on to the Black Firs to inquire after Elder's lad, who went to Australia, and call on my way home to see that poor girl of Stephens."

"Reet," said Joe; "and then you are close to the Red Acres. There is a young lady there who has got a rod in pickle for you, because you promised to call and have tea with her one day and didna. And she got out the best chiney, and put on her pinny wi' edging on, and curled her hair, and put two penn'orth of eau de Cologne on her pocket hankey, and then you didna call. And the consequence was she was as cross as two sticks, and I had to put up wi' it, and I didna half ha' a time of it. It was like lying down wi'oot a nighty on a bed of nettles, wi' a few Scotch thistles thrown in."

"I am very sorry indeed. I don't remember having given any promise, but if I've been remiss, kindly apologise for me."

"Nay, I'm not going to do anything of the sort.

Call and ha' the luncheon, and make your own apologies. We've got some beef that badly wants eatin', for it's as tough as some of your sermons; and whenever we get anything we conno eat ourselves, we always invite our friends to visit us, and we keep up our reputation for hospitality and get rid of what we are glad to dispose of at the same time. We shall expect you about twelve, and no excuses this time, or never dare to come within a mile and a half of the Red Acres again. I'd as soon ride a hard trottin' horse wi'oot a saddle, wi' a backbone like a knife handle, as face Lydia when the wind's in the east and she's got a grievance."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Wentworth, I will call. I told my housekeeper I should be back for lunch, but she won't mind. As for Miss Davies, I know her too well to be very much troubled. She is the very embodiment of good temper and sweet reasonableness."

"That's all you know," replied Joe. "You must live wi' a porcupine before you learn how to avoid the prickles. Be good till I see you again."

As Joe rode on, suddenly his face lighted up with a smile. "I'll do it," he said. "It will be fun to see Lydia in a tight corner for once. I think I heard her tell the girls to be careful, because the meat was nearly done, and there wouldna be any more till to-morrow."

At times "when the maggot bit him," to use his own phrase, he had almost a childish glee in playing a practical joke, and it had suddenly dawned on him that here was an opportunity to have some fun at his housekeeper's expense.

So he rode into the village, and first of all called at

his brother's, whom he found busy as usual, spraying some rose trees.

"Hallo, Rufe!" he cried. "I've brought you an invitation, which you mon accept if you are to keep reet wi' the 'powers that be' at the Red Acres. You mon put on a clean collar and a white tie if you ha' got one; if you hanno one, as white as you con manage, and you are to be at the Red Acres to-day at 12.30 prompt. There's to be 'a bit of a do' of some sort. It binna a birthday party, nor a weddin', nor a funeral, but it may end in any one of 'em. The Vicar's coming, and I'm going to call and ax Gilmore, and maybe one or two more. It's to be Lydia's 'do,' and she wonno take 'No' for an answer."

"I'm afraid it mon be 'No,' for all that. I've the minister coming about the buying of some land for a Sunday School, and I towd him to come on to dinner."

"Bring him along," replied Joe, with a grin. "The more the merrier. We are never troubled about two or three at our place. And mind you have good appetites. We always expect all our guests to do their duty by the victuals."

In the course of the morning Joe invited the doctor and postmaster, and three or four other guests, to luncheon, all of whom faithfully turned up at the Red Acres at 12.30. The first to arrive was Rufus and Mr. Wainwright, the Methodist minister. They were surprised to find the housekeeper and the maids up to their elbows in the washing tub, and not the slightest appearance of any preparations for entertaining company. Miss Davies received them, however, with her usual courtesy and expressed her regret that the master was out, but she explained that she

expected him to lunch, if they would care to come in and wait.

"There seems to be some mistake, miss," said Rufus. "It appears to me that our Joe has been playing us one of his tricks. Binna you expecting the Vicar and the doctor to lunch? He towd me you were having a party of some kind."

"My goodness, no!" she exclaimed; when, lifting up her eyes, she beheld the clergyman entering the garden gate, while farther down the road she could discern the doctor's trap. "It's too bad!" she exclaimed, with some vexation in her voice. "I am up to my elbows in work, and he knows we have very little meat in the house. Why, yonder is Mr. Jones and Joshua Lincoln coming!"

"So there is, miss," said Rufus. "What is to be done? There binna any harm in Mr. Wainwright's case and mine, for we con hurry back home, where we left a good dinner cooking; but it's vexing about the Vicar and the others. I felt all along there was a quirk in this, somehow. I'm sorry for you, Miss Davies—very sorry."

"Oh," she replied, after a few seconds' thought, "We will pull through. Fortunately I put a leg of pork on the fire to boil for the men's supper. And I can cook some rashers of ham, and we have plenty of eggs. Do you mind doing me a favour, Mr. Wentworth?"

"Anything within my power, miss, and that gladly."

"Well, just receive these guests. Don't say anything about our not being prepared for them, but tell them the master has not returned yet, and I shall be down directly."

"She is a woman in a thousand," said Rufus to the minister, when she had disappeared. "How

she puts up with the vagaries of my brother is a mystery to me. She'll pull this off as though she had known all about it for weeks. Many a woman would have sat down and cried, and many others would have stormed, but she seems equal to every emergency, and never loses her head. And she is as good as she is clever."

And so it proved. Rufus received the guests, seven in number, including himself and the minister.

In an incredible time all traces of the washing had disappeared, the maids were tidy and the table set in the dining room, where the company, under the impression they were waiting for the master to appear, were kept interested by Rufus's description of a rose show he had just attended in London, and the sights he had seen in the great city. Just as the clock struck one, Joe rode up.

"I hope you hanno waited for me for dinner," he exclaimed, as he entered. "I'm sorry to be late, but I've been detained. I will be ready in a couple of minutes, and if there is any man who has a better appetite, and con eat more in less time, I pity the victuals."

As he made his way into the housekeeper's room, he said to himself, "Now for it! I shall get my hair cut and a clean shave for nothing, I expect."

"Hallo, Lydia!" he exclaimed, "what's on? I see you've got company. Is it a birthday party, or what?"

"Oh, no," she replied, as quietly as though nothing unusual had happened. "Just a few friends have dropped in by accident to see you, sir. It's a very curious coincidence, of course, they should all come the same day, and all just at dinner time, but we shall manage."

"You binna going to ax them all to stay to dinner,

bin you? Gi' 'em some potatoes and buttermilk, and tell 'em it is the best we ha' got."

"But it would not be true. We have a leg of pork boiled, and I've killed a couple of chickens. They are all but ready, and we have plenty of pastries in the pantry."

"You'll ruin me wi' you extravagances," rejoined her master, pulling a wry face. "I didna bargain to feed all the tramps and beggars of the countryside."

CHAPTER XVI.

A VILLAGE TRAGEDY.

"The man who sets out to explain why some things happen has got a stiff job on."—J. W.

MISS CHEETHAM proved to be an excellent schoolmistress, notwithstanding the fact that she had made but an indifferent impression on Joe Wentworth on her first journey.

"She's much on her, and not much in her," was his verdict to his brother. "She couldna see a joke wi'oot workin' it out like a sum in arithmetic. I tried to make her laugh, but she didna seem to know how it ought to be done. There binna anythin' much sweeter than to hear a young lassie's laugh, when she binna afraid of it. I'd rather hear it than listen to a throstle sing, and, if I had my way, I wouldna put children under the care of anybody who didna do it often, and do it well. If I was on the School Committee, I shouldna ax if a mistress had first-class certificates, but whether she'd got good health, a good liver, and a sweet temper. I wouldna be so particular about algebra as about whether she did a lot of smiling every day."

As a matter of fact, Miss Cheetham had been taken at a disadvantage. She was downhearted at leaving home, especially as her father was lying critically ill at the time. Nervous at all times in the presence of strangers, she had schooled herself for the journey

to meet the stately Vicar, and it all turned out so different from what she had expected that she was perplexed and unhappy. But in the company of Gwen it was another matter, and she soon began to smile and chatter, and the two young ladies became fast friends from the first. The Vicar, to begin with, rather frightened her, but when she got to know him she learned to admire him.

She proved to have quite exceptional ability in the management of children, and was in every way a very efficient teacher.

"She wonno stay long," Joe Wentworth prophesied one day, when he and the Vicar were discussing matters connected with the school. "She is too good for the job. I give her six months—twelve at the longest."

"I'm afraid there is something in what you say, Mr. Wentworth," rejoined the Vicar. "But we must keep her if we can. She is so thoroughly mistress of her work that it would be next to impossible to replace her. Besides, she is playing the organ in church now. It seemed quite a godsend; she came just when young Edgar Seagrove got the offer of an organ at Lichfield. I do not know whatever we should have done if she had not volunteered to take it."

"Why," said Joe, "you could ha' had a handle put on it, and I could have sent you a lad to ha' turned it; but I reckon Miss Cheetham is making a pretty decent thing out of her teaching and the organ playing together."

"No," replied the Vicar. "She gets £40 for teaching, and the organ playing is voluntary."

"You dunno say so!" exclaimed Joe sarcastically. "She'll be buying diamonds and gold watches and all kinds of finery if she has so much. It's a direct

incentive to extravagance. I think you should reduce it at once to £60."

"You misunderstood me, Mr. Wentworth. I said we paid Miss Cheetham £40."

"Oh, no; I understood, and I suggest you reduce it to £60. I think any schoolmistress ought to be willing to pay £20 a year out of her own pocket for the honour of teaching the youngsters of this parish. You are far too liberal. I would also make her pay for the honour of playing the organ. When you go in for sweatin' you should do it thoroughly."

"Then you do not think we pay Miss Cheetham enough, Mr. Wentworth?" asked the Vicar, beginning to understand that Joe had been speaking sarcastically all the time.

"Enough? My dear sir, if she was a lassie of mine I'd set her to sweep floors, and feed pigs, rather than she should drone away so many hours in that school for a wage like that. If you want brains, pay for them, and it will pay you in the end. I've nowt to do wi' it, as I have no bairns goin' to school, but I reckon that a few of them wealthy farmers who are making as much in a week as they are giving her in a year to teach their youngsters, ought to be downreet ashamed of themselves. If you will call a meeting, although I'm not a speechmaker, I'd ha' a bit of pleasure in giving 'em my views wi'oot charging them anything for it."

"No; I don't think we must have a meeting. It must be done in some other way."

"You dunno believe in lettin' the cat among the pigeons, eh? Well, if you bring her salary up to £60 I'll give the last threepenny bit. I wonno be extravagant, but if I do wi'oot sugar in my tea for a week, I con perhaps manage that much."

"I would willingly give something myself," said the Vicar. "I could spare a pound or two by economy."

"No, you won't!" said the farmer. "You give half you get now, and starve yourself to do it. Not a penny, Vic., if I know it."

"But, Mr. Wentworth, I cannot ask others to give without setting them the example."

"I con. My motto is, 'Get all you con out of others, but when anybody comes to you, always remember to forget your purse.' I've saved pounds that way," he continued mendaciously.

A few days after this conversation the Vicar received a letter from Joe, stating that a friend of his had promised to provide the £20 that year to augment the salary, provided the parishioners would raise another £10, and of that sum he and his brother Rufe would give £9 19s. 10¾d., and he thought it was possible the rest of the parish might, with a big effort, raise the rest. It was evident to the good Vicar that Joe was giving the whole of it himself, and was confirmed in this opinion when, on mentioning the matter to Rufus, he found that he knew nothing about the matter. He therefore called at the Red Acres to remonstrate, and to offer to procure at least £20 in some other way.

"You are off your hoss, Vic., if you think I'm givin' any of that money out of my own pocket."

"Mr. Wentworth, you are not speaking the truth. Your brother told me he knew nothing about the matter, although he at once kindly volunteered to give his share when I explained the object."

"You monno believe our Rufe. He is good at inventin' stories to suit his purpose."

"That is not true, either. I would rather take your

brother's word than that of any other man in the parish. His veracity is unimpeachable."

"Glad you think so. You hanno found him out yet. The Wentworths are noted for stickin' to the truth; it runs in the blood, like hare-lip and bunions. You conno help it. What's in the teapot is sure to come out at the spout. But what about luncheon? When did you have a good meal last?"

"I must not stop to lunch, thank you, Mr. Wentworth. I have already encroached on the time of a busy man long enough, and I have several other calls to make."

"Aye!" replied Joe. "You've wasted me a mornin' as well as your own. But you may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. I feel peckish myself, and you look as if you could pick a bone. I dunno believe you get half enough to eat, and what you do eat dunno agree wi' you. It binna much credit to the parish to see the Vicar goin' about like a scarecrow. If I'd a hoss as thin as you, I'd either fatten or shoot him."

"I assure you, Mr. Wentworth, you are mistaken. My creature comforts are well looked after, insomuch that I am sometimes ashamed that my bodily needs should occupy the care and thought of others to such a large degree. I have a fair appetite and plenty of good, wholesome food."

"Then you put it in a bad skin," retorted the farmer. "You dunno do much credit to your cook. But it binna any use you tryin' to sneak away from the Red Acres wi'oot your lunch. I heard Lydia rattlin' the crockery, and you'd give mortal offence if you didna stop when she has got it ready for you. I should have to go wi'oot my lunch as well, for I darena face her if I let you go. You've no idea the life she leads me if she dunno get her own way. But

mum's the word; here she comes. I was just tellin' the Vicar, Lydia, that if he didna stop for his lunch there would be the more for you and me; and as we hanno got very much in the house, while he will be welcome to stay, we shanno cry our eyes out if he dunno."

"It is well the Vicar knows you, sir," Miss Davies replied, stepping forward with a smile to greet the clergyman. "We have plenty to go round and to spare; and lunch is quite ready. Come this way, please! I've set it in the parlour."

"That's in honour of your visit, Vic. The kitchen would ha' bin good enough for me. I made a mistake when I wonno a parson. If I had bin the sinners would ha' had a tottering time, and as for Dissenters, I wouldna ha' given them half a chance of heaven, except Lydia there. I'd ha' tried as a special favour to ha' smuggled her in the back way somehow, but all the others would have to come through the church door."

"I know you don't mean what you say," replied the Vicar, "or it would be my duty to remind you that intolerance is not a Christian virtue, though it has often been mistaken for one."

"That's the worst of you. I've often said that you've only one fault. You want a Heaven so big that you'd let everybody in—rogues and rascals included—and there would be no gettin' away from the rabble; while I want a nice, cosy little place, wi' just enough room for me and my friends, and maybe one or two Stourbridge strangers to give variety. And the Vicar of Stourbridge believes as I do. My word! you should ha' heard him go for heretics last Sunday week. It was the creeds, catechism, and confirmation,

or the gridiron. That's the kind of preachin' I like. Not soft soap, but sulphur, and plenty of it."

They were just in the middle of their luncheon, when Miss Davies was called out of the room. When she returned she looked very perturbed, which Joe at once observed. "What is the matter, Lydia?" he asked. "Has your young man chucked you up and run away wi' a widow?"

"Oh," she said, "something dreadful has happened. They say that Miss Cheetham has been found in the lower coppice!"

"Murdered!" exclaimed both men at once. "Never!"

"Here is Sir John Crookworth's groom come to fetch the Vicar, and he said there is no doubt of the fact. Poor girl, her head has been beaten in by some ruffian, and the body was found lying in the wood!"

This terrible news proved too true. For weeks the village lay under the shadow of this crime—the first of its kind that had ever stained its annals, so far as could be discovered. No trace could be found of the perpetrator of the dreadful deed. The police were unable to find the slightest clue, and it added another to the long list of undiscovered crimes which await the Judgment Day to be revealed.

Joe Wentworth spared neither time nor money over the case, and fretted and fumed every time the police came to what he called a dead end; but in spite of all, the mystery remains a mystery to this day.

CHAPTER XVII.

A TRAGEDY OF WEALTH.

"You wonno frighten trouble away by shaking a cheque book in its face."—J. W.

SIR JOHN CROOKWORTH married late in life. His love story was a rustic idyll; his life a romance. A poor lad in the village, he had been driven out by the cruelty and harshness of his master, with whose daughter he had fallen in love. That love was a bright and quenchless star, which led him safely over miasmic moral swamps, and guided him in his upward path to fame and fortune. When, after many years, he came back to Summerton and married Mary Benson, he was a wealthy man, and took possession of the Hall, where, as a lad, he had carried mortar to the bricklayers. The villagers who had gone to school with him touched their hats, and the women curtsied, at first to his annoyance, and then to his amusement; while his wife, who had lived amongst them all her life, was allowed to pass without any of these signs of social respect. Once, when he was walking down the street in company with Joe Wentworth, he remarked on this, and said he wished he could induce the people to drop it.

"It binna you, Sir John," rejoined the sharp-tongued farmer. "It's your title and the King's image in your pocket to which they are kow-towing. If I was made lord to-morrow they'd bow to me."

"I know that," he replied. "That is the reason I hate it. When I came home as poor Jack Crookworth, they wouldn't look at me, and threatened to set the dogs on me; but it was another matter when they knew I owned the Hall and sported a title. It's a bit disgusting."

"Oh, well, I wouldna fash my soul about it anyway. If they like to bow and curtsey, let 'em. It's a higglety, pigglety world, and we've got to make the best of it. It is a mistake to take medicine if you binna badly, and it's a mistake to make troubles of things you ought to laugh at. I saw a hedgehog in my garden yesterday morning, but I dinna pick him up and put him in my pocket."

And so in due time Sir John settled down to the ways of the village, and was a good neighbour to all; while his wife delighted in playing the part of Lady Bountiful to the poorer friends of her youth. She was the embodiment of gentleness and goodness, one whom misfortune had not soured nor prosperity made proud. When, as spinster, she had lived in her lonely cottage at the end of the village, she had been the same as now she was the head of an establishment with servants to wait upon her. Indeed, she often waited on them, her husband said, and they learnt to love her. She hated to be called "her ladyship," and soon it became an established order at the Hall that she was always addressed as "the mistress." And the Vicar, the Rev. Bedford Bird, brought to her all the cases of his parishioners which needed help, and the assistance that was rendered was all the more welcome because it was always given with a sweet unobtrusiveness which never wounded the self-respect of the poor. Perhaps the most welcome visitor at the Hall was Rufus Wentworth, for had he not been her

good friend, staunch and true, in those past days of loneliness and heartache, when she tried to feed her soul on the memory of a love which was apparently lost for ever? And, strange to say, he was her spiritual adviser and her confidant; for somehow she never got over the feeling of aloofness which possessed her in the earlier days towards the Vicar. And so it came to pass that Rufus was the first to know of a great joy that was coming to her and her husband twelve months after their marriage. For she was, to the surprise of both of them, soon to become a mother, and it needed but this to fill her cup to the brim with happiness.

"Well," replied Rufus, "I suppose we none of us deserve all the many mercies of God, but He gives not according to our deserts, but according to His infinite lovingkindness. For the rest, you have been a good daughter, and now you are a good wife. You helped the poor when you were poor yourself, and now you are rich, money has not spoilt you. You wear the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit. My brother said the other night that money acts like quicklime on most folks—it dissolves their virtues; but with you it has acted like salt and preserved them."

"What a curious man he is!" she said. "My husband has invited him to dine with us several times, but he never will come. He says it would spoil his manners if he kept company with the gentry. I think John feels a bit hurt about it, as we have both known him from childhood."

"I'm sure he does not mean to give you pain. He would not do that; but I know he has a mortal horror of going anywhere where he cannot feel at home."

When Rufus related this conversation to his brother,

he replied, "It is not the master and mistress I'm freetened at but the servants. I hate to have a meal wi' two or three able-bodied men dancing round me, who would be far better employed in the fields, or making roads, than waiting till you have just picked up the last bite, and when it's half-way to your mouth, snatching your plate away, like as if they grudged you the time and victuals as well. Besides, they give you so many sorts of food that you've only just got the taste of one in your mouth, and begin to like it, when they give you another. I prefer to settle down to solid work."

In a little while, however, Joe and Sir John became great friends, and were often to be seen together, strolling through the fields belonging to the former, and looking at the horses, an increasing number of which Sir John kept. Indeed, Joe had an understanding that when he secured anything exceptional in horseflesh he should let him have the first refusal.

One morning the news reached the Red Acres that Lady Crookworth had given birth to a son, but that her own life was in great jeopardy, and the doctor held out but little hopes of her recovery.

Joe at once hastened to the Hall, to find that rumour in this case had not overrun the truth, and that the husband and father was going about like a man distracted, being forbidden to see her. Joe found him wandering in the conservatories, taking notice of nothing and nobody. Perhaps the saddest sight on earth is a strong man distraught with grief. He paid no heed to Wentworth's greeting, but stood staring at him with a countenance white and strained, as though he had seen a ghost.

"Come, come, Sir John!" said Joe. "This wunno do. You mon bear up like a man. She binna dead

yet, and there has been many a woman who has been near dying who has lived to scold her husband and make him wish at times he hadna been so anxious for her not to die."

"Wentworth," he replied, "if anything happens to her I shall be a broken man. To think I have waited for her all these years and that she should be taken from me after less than two years of married life! As for getting better, I know she won't. I heard the specialist say it was nine hundred and ninety-nine chances out of a thousand that she would not recover."

"Then hang on to that one chance tooth and nail," said Joe. "I have known three cases in my life where specialists were called in, and two of them they said wouldna get better, and the other would. And the one died and the other two recovered. As for being a broken man, that binna the way to talk. But look here, Sir John, there is one thing I should do if I were you."

"What is that? If it is anything that money can buy, speak up, Wentworth. God knows I'd willingly give all I possess if it would save her life!"

"No, money wonno buy it," retorted Joe. "But then there are a good many things of the best you conno pay for wi' sovereigns or big cheques, either. I should send for our Rufe to pray for her. When Gwen was down wi' diphtheria it was just Rufus's prayers that saved her and nowt else. I am not big on religion, as some foaks think, but when I see a thing works I'm not fool enough to shut my eyes and say it binna any use. And I've seen so many cases where Rufe gets what he asks for, that I come to believe when he falls on his knees there is Somebody above who listens to what he has to say, and sends the answer."

"The Vicar has been twice," replied Sir John.

"Aye; I wonno say anything agin the Vicar, for he's as good as they are made, but I'll be bound he just took out his book and read a few prayers; and read prayers always seem to me like ready-made clothes—they are loose at the elbow, short at the wrists, and baggy at the knees. They fit too tight at one place and too loose at another. But Rufe just goes straight for what he wants—the same as if he was going for a pound of sugar—asks for it and gets it. Some folks' prayers—mine among 'em—seem like shouting down those telephones they've lately invented, where there is nobody at the other end. It's waste breath mostly."

"I think what you say is true. We will send for your brother, certainly."

"Reet," said Joe. "Between Rufe's prayer and the doctor's pills I think she will be saved, if anything con save her. So cheer up, sir, and dunno cross the bridge while you are a mile and a half away from it. One of my maxims is, 'Dunno worry about maybe's,' for of all 'be's' they've the sharpest sting. I knew a fellow who never would eat fish because his brother was choked wi' a fish bone, but his feet weighed more than his head. And there was a chap on board wi' us on one voyage I took, who got the idea he was going to die by being struck by lightning. And every time there was any sign of a thunderstorm he trembled in his shoes. What he did die of was a mosquito bite, and he took six weeks in doin' it."

Joe was justified in his opinion, for in a few days there was a great change for the better, and in a month Sir John had the satisfaction of seeing his wife downstairs. But a great sorrow, nevertheless, fell on both father and mother, for the babe, which thrived

wonderfully, took but little notice of anything that went on around it, and never cried. One day its mother heard it making a noise in its tiny throat, and a strange fear gripped her soul. Gradually the truth broke in upon the distracted parents—the child was deaf and dumb!

Oh, the heartache of that terrible hour, when, without any possibility of mistake, the truth was brought home to them! All that money could do was done, but Nature had marked the child as one of her "unfortunates," and neither wealth nor skill availed to open those two gates into the child-mind. It was a piteous sight to observe the mother hoping against hope, repeatedly trying to get her child to talk. As for Sir John, this stroke of ill-fortune made him morose and silent, and the villagers noticed a great change for the worse in him, and his dealings with them. Before, he noticed everybody, and had a smile and a cheery word for old and young alike, the most they could get from him now in answer to their bows and curtseys was a silent acknowledgment, and sometimes he passed them entirely unheeding. His place, too, in the church was often vacant now, and he was frequently seen wandering among the woods or in the meadows—a lonely and pathetic figure.

As the child, who was named Alec, grew up, he took a strange liking to Joe Wentworth, and always showed unmistakable pleasure in his company, following him about from place to place like a faithful dog. When he was but a child, Joe would lift him on his saddle before him, and give him rides whenever he was riding to a house of which he felt certain of a welcome, and the little chap would clap his hands with delight and make a curious noise in his throat.

"You know what you mean, old chap!" Joe would

say, "but I'm blest if I do. However, it's all one, so that you are happy."

"It's very kind of you to take such interest in that child," Miss Davies once said to him. "I cannot induce him to look at me when you are about. He follows you about like a dog."

"Aye, poor little chap! But he's wonderfully cute and knowin'. And he con ride first-class, and he binna a bit afraid. I dunno let my hosses stop to pick up daisies, but I never go fast enough for him. He always claps his hands for me to go faster. I tried a hunter at a stone wall the other day, and he cleared it like a bird, and if that youngster didna want me to do it again! There's grit for you!"

"I wish, sir," said Miss Davies, after a pause, "you would not take so many risks. I'm always afraid something dreadful will happen when I see you on the back of one of those spirited horses. You should leave them to Sam or some of the lads."

"Well, I like that for a religious young woman!" he answered. "If there is a neck to be broken, let it be somebody else's rather than your own—eh? Nice sort of comfortable creed to go through life with. I'm not what the Vicar calls a saint, and I'm sure our Rufe wouldna have my name on a Methodist class book, but I ha' never gone on the principle of taking all the cream and lettin' others ha' the sour milk. Of course, if Sam got sent to kingdom come, Susan might marry again and choose a chap wi' more beauty."

"Oh, I didn't mean that. I only thought that as they were younger they were more capable of managing a strong spirited horse."

"Now you've made it wuss," said Joe. "There binna a man or lad in England or France that con do

that—at least, I've got to make his acquaintance if there is. I've ridden bronchos in America and buck-jumpers in Canada, a full-blooded Arab in Arabia that had a legion of imps under his beautiful skin, and I've come through so far wi'oot a broken bone, though I've had one of two nasty bumps. Besides, miss, if I got my ticket to-morrow, it wouldna matter to anybody but myself. I've no wife or bairns, and I wouldna be missed."

"Oh, don't say that! We should all miss you. You would leave a place nobody else could fill."

"Aye!" replied Joe. "You put your arm in that pail of milk, and draw it out again, and see what a big hole there will be left. That's about how much I should be missed. But I binna goin' to bother about that. I'm goin' to ha' as good a time as I con, and then, when the end comes I binna goin' to whine; and when I cross the river I'll whistle 'Jerusalem the Golden,' if I con, just to let the angels know I'm comin'."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MODERN MIRACLE.

"Kindness is like mint—once you've sown it the crop keeps comin'."—J. W.

SIR JOHN CROOKWORTH determined to send Alec to a school for the deaf and dumb as soon as he was old enough, but the little fellow made such strenuous opposition when the time came, especially at the idea of leaving his friend Joe Wentworth, that at the request of his mother the project was abandoned—at least, for a time. He had learned the deaf and dumb alphabet, and all the servants at the Hall, as well as his mother and father were soon able to converse with him by its use. But the greatest surprise and delight came to him one day when, riding out with Joe, the latter began to spell out words to him. For the farmer had got his housekeeper, Miss Davies, first of all to learn it and then to teach him.

"I am too owd to pick up things from books," he said, "but I con remember what I see and hear. For what I read, my memory has four holes for letting things in and six for lettin' 'em out."

"I will help you all I can," said Miss Davies. "I think it is splendid that a man at your age should take the trouble to learn anything in order that you may talk with a boy."

"Oh, well," said Joe, "I mon do somethin' to keep myself from gettin' into mischief. Only this mornin'

I lay in bed thinkin' how much better it would be for me if I had a wife who would nurse me when I am sick, blow me up when I'm well, and keep me poor at all times. I saved three and sixpence halfpenny last week, and it's a bother to know where to get a safe investment for one's money in these times. And when a man at my time of life begins broodin' o'er such subjects he'd better begin to learn the multiplication table, and so keep his mind occupied, or he's a gonner as sure as a hoss that has fallen into a coalpit. And so I thought of this deaf and dumb alphabet and little Alec; and how often he has tried to make me understand things. His delight will be unbounded. Besides, if I was foolish enough to get married, I might marry a deaf and dumb woman, you see; then, if I didna want to know what she was sayin', all I'd have to do would be to shut my eyes and turn my back on her."

Joe made very commendable headway with his task, and, as already intimated, sprang a surprise on the little chap by suddenly putting the reins over his arm and asking him what he thought of the horse he was driving! Instantly a flash of gratitude leaped into the boy's eyes, for he understood in a moment that Joe must have given himself this trouble in order to converse with him, and he seized his hands, and moved his head rapidly from side to side, as he always did when excited.

"All reet," said Joe. "I understand. Now you and I will exchange ideas about hosses. You con do the talkin' while I drive. I con keep one eye on your fingers and the other on the mare—at least, this one. Some of mine need both eyes on the job, but I'd trust this one in a wild beast show procession wi' an owd woman and a basket of eggs."

When Rufus heard what had happened, he was greatly delighted. "Why, Joe, they tell me that you have been learning a new language," he said to his brother the first time they met afterwards.

"Aye," replied Joe, "but I should need to learn half a dozen languages to keep pace in talkin' wi' you. I know four already; so look out, or I shall o'ertake you yet."

"Four!" exclaimed Rufus. "I didna know we had such an expert linguist in our family."

"Oh, the things you know binna nowt to them you dunno know. I con speak English, and Staffordshire, and American, and now dummy. There is a great advantage in the latter. You see, when I am sellin' a poor hoss, and want to make it out a nonsuch, I con do it wi'oot anyone hearin' me. The worst of it is so few know how to use it. I suppose I'm about the only hoss dealer in the country who is an expert at it."

"Lies bin lies, whether they are spoken on the fingers or by the tongue," said Rufus. "And let me tell you that the recording angel has eyes as well as ears. But, angel or no angel, it is always best to stick to the truth. And the simple truth of this matter is that you have gone to the trouble of doing what not one man in a hundred would have done at your time of life in order to please a poor lad deprived of some of his senses. And it is not only a fine thing, but the finest thing I've heard of for many a day. I'm proud of you, and I wanted to tell you."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Joe. "Have you only just found that out? I con tell you this, Rufe: if the only brother I have wonno such a poor stick, the name of Wentworth would be one to be proud of, and I shouldna be afraid of owning it in any company, that

is, my name. As it is, I sometimes hold my tongue for fear they should confound me wi' my brother."

"Well," replied Rufus, "I'm not conscious of having done anything that I could put alongside of what you have done for Alec. Everybody in the village is talking about it. They are both surprised and delighted."

"And so you three owd women have been discussing me in my absence?" exclaimed Joe, pulling a wry face. "It's a pity you've nothin' better to do. If I like to learn dummy language, or Arabic, instead of sittin' making cat's eyes at my housekeeper at neets, what's that to do wi' any of you? You set yourselves up, the lot of you, as examples to the whole neighbourhood, and you are as fond of a bit of gossip as any silly woman who ever wore a hair net. It's a pity you conno stick to your sermon makin' and rose growin' wi'oot meddlin' wi' things which dunno concern you."

Joe had a very trying time the next fortnight, for not only did Sir John and his wife send to thank him, but the Vicar also called at the Red Acres on the same errand and on the same day. Never did the good clergyman find the master of the Red Acres more irritable and provoking than on this visit.

"Look here, Vic.," he said, after learning the purpose of his visit, "dunno you come botherin' me. I've something far more important to do than listenin' to your tittle-tattle. You would be far better employed in makin' a new sermon, for those you've given us lately smelt of the sixteenth century. The Vicar of Stourbridge conno preach any better than a third-rate Methodist local preacher, but he con beat you hollow. If I fed any of my servants as you feed your flock, they would all leave in a week—and serve me reet,

too. But you con go on prosing away, week after week, and month after month, tellin' us about Naaman's leprosy or Simon Peter's wife's mother's fever, but you've nothin' to say about my neighbour who is starvin' his farm, and makin' his wife and family as miserable as a bad temper con. You read sometimes about what Augustine said, but you take no notice of the fact that Jack Binns turned his children into the street in their nighties the other neet when he was drunk. And you never have a word about the scandalmongers in Summerton, or the three or four fellows who are so lazy that the only thing they con do wi'oot sweatin' is to lift a pint mug of beer to their mouths, and con keep at it all day and start agin in the mornin'. You dunno know your business any more than a cat knows how to make apricot jam."

"Mr. Wentworth," replied the Vicar, "nobody is more conscious of their own imperfections than I; but if my preaching would induce others to such deeds as this of yours—"

"Your preachin' had nothin' to do wi' it!" broke in the farmer. "I got the idea through readin' a farrier's book on 'How to Doctor Hosses Sufferin' from Glanders.' Now I mon be goin'. If you want anythin' to eat or drink, and you look as if you'd bin livin' on cucumbers and ice cream, ring that bell. My housekeeper dotes on parsons. She has an idea that they are as good as they look. She hanno found em out yet, and I shall get my hair pulled if I dunno ask you. You needna have anythin' if you dunno like, though I hope you will, for we had a hare for dinner—so high that it nearly lifted the roof off the house, and there is some of it left, which she'll serve up for supper if you dunno ha' it. If you want to

practise on the lines of the parable of the Good Samaritan, you finish off that hare. Lydia," he said to his housekeeper, as she appeared in the doorway, "just give the Vicar a good blow out. He has had so little to eat at home that he gets the wind on his stomach, and we get it in his sermons."

"Indeed, Mr. Wentworth," exclaimed the Vicar, "I do not need anything. I've had my dinner."

"Then eat it against you do!" was Joe's only reply. "You stand o'er him and read the Riot Act, Lydia, if he dunno clear the dishes. Gi' him that hare—it will suit a high churchman; and that bit of apple pie you put on the table for the third time to-day. I'm tired of seein' it. I mon be goin' now; I've a hoss down wi' colic. But mind you two dunno get courtin'; I wunno have any scandal associated wi' the Red Acres."

And Joe went off chuckling, leaving the Vicar confused and Miss Davies flushing angrily.

"My!" he said to himself, "Lydia looked like a thunderstorm! I'll catch it, I guess, when I go in to tea!" In which prophecy he was quite correct. He listened to what she said with very contrite looks, but never said a word until she had finished, and then said, "There is a throstle singing in the orchard. I think I will go out and hear it. I think it must be a male bird; there is no discord in its song."

* * * * *

The summer passed quickly away, and Joe and Alec were often seen out driving together. Indeed, his father declared he lived more at the Red Acres than at the Hall. The boy was never so happy as in the company of the horse dealer. The latter joked a good deal about this, saying that he and his com-

panion were the two most silent, and hence the two wisest members of the community.

One day Joe drove up to the Hall to call for Alec, as was his wont. He was driving to a neighbouring town, some ten or twelve miles away, and knew Alec would enjoy the ride. After Joe had transacted his business he gave Alec a tea such as the lad loved, and then turned the trap for home. When they had travelled a short distance clouds gathered in thick darkness, and a thunderstorm came on while they were yet eight miles from home and far from shelter. The lightning was very vivid, and the horse, a very spirited one, grew nervous, and reared and plunged in a very dangerous manner, and Joe, with all his skill in driving, was hard put to it. Suddenly, passing under a great poplar tree, there shot a tongue of flame that darted through the branches, followed by a sharp crackling noise and then came a crash.

The effect was strange. The horse was wrenched from the trap, the front of which was splintered. The driver fell head foremost on the ground, but was saved from anything more serious than slight concussion, while the boy fell across his prostrate body and was without a scratch. But the strangest effect was produced upon the lad. The shock was such that his tongue was untied, and he rose from his feet, and, throwing his arms about in a wild fashion, began to shout "Oh! Oh!"

Joe was so taken aback that for a moment he forgot all about his horse, which went off at a mad gallop.

"Are you hurt?" asked Joe on his fingers of the dumb boy.

"No, no, no!" he said, quite plainly, three times over in rising tones as each monosyllable was uttered.

"This is a queer go," the farmer muttered, more to

himself than to his companion. "I've heard of Baalam's ass speaking, but this beats that all to fits! Well, Alec," he said, turning to the boy, "were you freetened?"

"No," he replied, and then added very slowly, as if he were waiting for the words to come, "A little."

"You might easily be excused if you were a good deal," he replied. "I thought when that flash came we were booked through wi'oot a return ticket. But what is to be done now? The hoss has gone wi'oot asking permission, and the trap needs the doctor. Seems to me we had better pull it into this field and then walk on. We canno stand here and grow like mushrooms."

And then Alec, as if it had only just dawned upon him that he could hear and speak, threw up his arms and began jumping about the road and exclaiming, "I can speak! Oh, Mr. Wentworth, I can speak!"

"Aye, lad, so I hear! And I'd gladly lose four hosses and six traps to have had this happen. I guess this will be the happiest day that your mother and father have known for many a year. Sir John will be as glad as if somebody had given him a penn'orth of roasted chestnuts!"

Joe did not over-estimate the joy at the Hall when the wondrous news reached its inmates. Sir John offered at once to make good any damage done to the horse and trap; and Joe had great difficulty in convincing him that a five pound note would abundantly cover all the loss he had sustained.

Fortunately, the horse was captured about a mile from home, without having done any injury to himself, or likewise to any human being.

"Gi the folks in the village a feed if you want to spend some money, Sir John," he said. "There is

nobody but what is glad that Alec has got his speech, and some of the labourers dunno get a really good tuck in oftener than once a year. You get three a day, and pigeon pie and chicken between times to keep you from fainting; but wi' them it is different."

"A very good idea, Wentworth! It shall be done. They shall have the best feed of their life; and I'll pay the wages of the men for that day, and you shall be the master of the feast."

"Nay," replied Joe, "that wonno do. I'd rather be master of a feast than a funeral any day; but the foaks wunno think half so much of it if you and the wife binna there to do the honours. You've heard say, sir, that the English are very fond of a lord, and they bin. A title takes 'em, and a 'sir' is the next thing to a lord, the same as a mule is the next thing to a hoss. They dunno know, poor things! what awfully poor stuff often goes to a title, and that you con buy one in London for an owd song sometimes, and I binna goin' to tell 'em. I guess they gi' you yours because some other chap wanted your berth, and it was a respectable way of gettin' rid of you. Of course you needna confess unless you like."

"They gave it me in order that they could refuse it to another man," replied Sir John, who not infrequently caught Joe's whimsical manner of speech, and answered after his own fashion.

"I thought it was something of that sort. I once had a title offered me in America, but not caring to be among the aristocracy, I refused it."

"Oh, I never heard of that before, Wentworth. What was it?"

"It was an H.S.B., and I got the chance when I was in jail."

"H.S.B.," said Sir John. "What is that? And in jail! You have never been in jail, have you?"

"Aye! The Yankees mistook me for another fellow who tried to help some of the gold-bugs of Wall Street to get to heaven by easing them of a little of their money. He was about as much like me as a bluebottle is like a grasshopper; but I did a few weeks' 'hard' before they found it out, and then, just as I was getting used to it, they wouldna keep me any longer, and turned me out into the cowd, hard world without so much as saying, 'By your leave.' I might ha' wanted to stay; I didna, as it happened; but it was all the same if I had. They took me in wi'oot my permission and they turned me out the same. It's a way they have in the United States."

"But what does H.S.B. mean? I never heard of that title before," said the baronet.

"It's Head of the Scrubbing Brigade. I scrubbed and scoured my floor so well, they offered me the job of first boss with the title of H.S.B.; but while I recognised my own merits, I was quite willing somebody else should ha' the honour."

CHAPTER XIX.

A LESSON IN KINDNESS TO ANIMALS.

"If animals were not dumb they would ha' some fine stories to tell. We call 'em brutes and beasts, but the brutes and beasts are often those who own 'em."—J. W.

JOE WENTWORTH was riding on horseback one day through a village some ten miles away from home. A long hill led out of the heart of the village to the upper part, where stood a fine old church which was a landmark for many miles around.

Up this hill a man was driving a very lean horse in a cart laden with coal. Joe had allowed his own horse to go at his own pace, the bridle rein hanging loosely on the neck of the animal. When some distance up the hill, he noticed the carter lashing the horse most unmercifully. The poor beast was pulling all it knew, but both horse and cart had stuck. Joe at once gently touched his own steed with his heels, and soon was alongside the man. "Here, stop that, governor," he cried. "Dunno you see the hoss has more than he con pull?"

"Who are you?" answered the surly fellow, after looking at Joe for a minute, and concluding he could easily match him in any encounter. "Mind your own business, or I'll make you!"

All this was said with a profusion of oaths unfit for my pen to write.

"It dunno much matter who I am," replied Joe. "I am minding my own business; it is the business of every decent fellow to take the part of a dumb creature that is being abused wi'oot rhyme or reason. As to makin' me do anythin' I dunno like, you'll find that you ha' got a job on that will last a fortneet wi'oot board or wages. But I tell you this, if I see you lashing that poor beast again, who seems to live by looking at haystacks on the other side of the hedge, I'll gi' you such a thrashing as you hanno had since you were big enough to know your own big toe from your little one."

"You'd better try it on," was the reply. "Now then, Dobbin, gee up!" and the whip was applied once more with vigour, wrapping itself round the poor beast's legs.

The next moment Joe's riding whip was also applied, with all the strength of his sinewy arm, to the head and shoulders of the man. He uttered a cry of pain and surprise, and the next moment rushed at the little man on horseback, gripping the end of his whipstock and aiming a vicious blow at him.

But Joe was expecting him, and quickly caused his horse to swerve on one side, with the result that he rushed past and received two or three strokes as he passed. Maddened and enraged, he bellowed like a bull, and once more made a rush.

This time Joe struck the uplifted whipstock from his hand, and his horse's shoulder caught the man, and sent him spinning across the road into the ditch, where there were three inches of black mud.

"Had enough?" asked Joe, as he watched him scramble out. "If not, there is plenty more where that comes from. I am just beginning to warm up and enjoy it; but you dunno seem to be getting your share of the fun. You will want your boots blackened before you go to church on Sunday."

The man had climbed up out of the ditch, but evinced no desire to renew the combat. Joe sat looking at him for a few moments, and then turned his horse's head and pulled alongside the poor panting beast in the shafts of the coal cart. He noticed at once that one shoulder was badly chafed by the collar, and that it was suffering from a saddle sore. Up till now he had treated the matter in his usual light, chaffing manner, but there was white anger in his tones as he again faced the driver and asked, "Is this your hoss and cart?"

He was rewarded with a surly nod from the driver.

"Well, I dunno know quite what you deserve for driving an animal in that condition," he said; "but if I had my way, I'd buy a donkey cart and fill it wi' coal, and put you in the shafts and make you pull it up this hill all day. I'm going straight to the police to report you, and if you dunno get a turn on the treadmill you ought to."

This threat at length evidently touched the fellow, for he began to whine something about being a poor man, and that he was sorry and wouldna do it again if Joe would only overlook it this time.

"Well, then," said Joe, "jump up on that cart and throw those big lumps of coal on to the side of the road until I tell you to stop."

The man did as he was told, and Joe sat and watched until quite a big pile of coal was heaped under the hedge. "Now," continued Joe, "I think your hoss might manage that, though the only thing he is fit for is a baby's perambulator. You con take that load and come back for this that is left, and then you donno work that animal any more till those sores are healed. I'm going to set an officer to keep his eye on you; and I tell you this, you wunno get off wi' a fine if you get caught. John Scott, I see, is your name on the cart, and I've no doubt such an amiable and kind-hearted a gentleman as you will be well known in the neighbourhood you come from. My name is Joe Wentworth, of the Red Acres. Ever heard of it before?"

"Yes. Everybody knows your name, Mr. Wentworth, about here; but I've never seen you before."

"No," replied Joe, "I dunno keep company wi' such as you. But if you know me you'll know I never make a threat that I dunno intend to keep, and I promise that owd hoss of yours that I'm going to see it binna badly treated in the future; and I promise you twelve months in jail shall be the shortest time you shall ha' to learn that because a man has given five pounds or thereabouts for an owd hoss, it dunno give him the reet to treat it cruelly. Now I've wasted time and advice enough on you, and I hope it binna as hopeless as bastin' a milestone wi' butter, but that's your lookout."

"Hallo, Rufe!" he cried an hour later, as he drew rein at his brother's house, the Rosary. "I've called for your resignation as a Methody local preacher."

"My resignation?" answered Rufus. "What's in

the wind now? But binna you comin' in? I con hear the cups rattling, so I guess Lucy is getting tea ready."

"There binna any music equal to that except it be a pound of real good beefsteak an inch thick frying in a pan wi' onions. And havin' a musical ear, I conno pass by. But what about that resignation?"

"You hanno told me what it is for? Why should I resign? I hanno done anythin' to disgrace the position, I hope?"

"I dunno know. Your conscience con best tell you that—that is, if you have any conscience left. But didna you say one day that if ever I started to preach you'd give up, as it would never do to have two preachers of the same name going about the country, as the people wouldna be able to put up wi' the pair of us?"

"I did say that I'd have to consider it," replied Rufus with a smile.

"Well, then, put your considerin' cap on. I began to-day, and more than that, I made one convert—at least, I think I have. And if hosses con understand what men say, I'll be bound there is one hoss grinnin' to himself because he saw his owner makin' an ass of himself."

"You mon begin at the beginning if I'm to understand the story. If you are going to be a preacher the first important qualification is that you speak plainly so that you con be understood."

"Nay, nay," replied Joe. "The greatest preachers are those who con say plain things in a way that

they conno be understood, and if I'm going to be a preacher I'm going to be a great one. But for this once I'll come down to the level of my audience, but it monno be taken as a sample of my regular style."

And forthwith he told the story, and when he had finished it he said, "And now, Rufe, I want you to go to this Scott's place and see how the hoss is comin' on. You con make any excuse you like; you are good at excuses, but we mon keep our promises to that poor owd brute."

"All reet. I've wanted to go over in that direction for some time. Nat Wilslow, of Welton, has promised me some briar stocks, and it will only be a couple of miles farther on."

"You con ha' a hoss and trap whenever it suits you to go. You mon promise, however, not to drive furiously, like that fellow you preach about—Jehu, the son of Nimshi. You hanno preached that sermon lately," he added, with a twinkle in his eye.

"No," replied the brother; "and I dunno intend to. A sermon should induce men to keep the law, and not incite them to break it, which seems to be the effect that sermon had on you. As for driving furiously, I leave that to my brother, who seems to delight in risking his own neck and the necks of others every time he gets behind a hoss."

"Well, I do mortally hate a hoss that wants to lean its head against every wall it comes to and work out sums in mental arithmetic. The time for any thoughtful hoss to do that is when it is in the stable. As for breaking my neck, I've never done it yet, and if other folks ride behind my hosses when I'm driving, it's my business to look after the hoss and theirs to

look after their own neck. Besides, it wouldna be a great loss, would it, if some folks did get their neck broken? So far as I con see, they would easily be able to do as much thinking wi' their necks out o' joint as they do now."

"For myself, I'd rather be safe than sorry," answered Rufus. "There seems no sense in always driving as though it were a matter of life and death. They tell me you nearly ran over Billy Stroud the other day?"

"I missed him by an inch, and an inch is as good as a thousand miles. It would ha' been his own fault if he had got knocked into the middle of next week. He was half-way across the road when I turned the corner. Instead of going straight on he dodged back, then repented and turned again. If I'd had any other hoss in the shafts but Briton, Billy would ha' been askin' the angels to let him into heaven before you could count ten. But that hoss feels the least pull on the bit, and I did my best to think and act at the same time. Before Billy could shut his eyes we were past him and his chances of dyin' wi' his shoes off were increased a hundredfold. Men like Billy should go about wi' a chain and dog collar on and a sensible woman to lead them. If I'd killed him it would ha' reduced the idiots in the village fifty per cent."

"You'll be doing serious mischief some of these days," said Rufus. "It really is dangerous, the pace you drive."

"Pooh! There binna anything worth doing but what there is an element of danger in it. I knew a fellow who pricked his finger when cuttin' a rose, and he died next morning."

"A case of blood poisoning, I should think," remarked Rufus.

"No; he was eatin' a herrin' for his tea and a bone stuck in his throat!"

CHAPTER XX.

A MISS IS AS GOOD AS A MILE.

"Many a man in tryin' to crack a walnut has broken his own tooth instead."—J. W.

A FEW days later Joe was going on to a horse sale at Shrewsbury, where he had sent a dozen of his best hunters, for prices were high, and he wanted, as he said, to reduce his stock and increase his balance at the bank. On the same day Rufus had arranged to take his projected journey to Welton and make inquiries about John Scott and his horse for his brother.

"You con have Briton, who will do the distance in less than no time; but he now and again takes it into his head to try and climb telegraph poles, jest to see what's taking place in the surrounding country; or you con have the owd grey mare, who will take you as quick as you could walk if you had five corns on one foot and six on the other, and wore tight boots. The one will try your vigilance and the other your patience."

"I'll take the grey mare. I've driven her before, and she goes fast enough for any reasonable man. Briton is a bit too frisky for me. I'd rather be safe than sorry."

"That's an owd woman's motto and no mistake. I'd hate always to be thinkin' about my own safety. I like a life wi' a spice of danger in it. There binna

any fun in your be-sure-you-dunno-get-hurt sort of existence. I'd rather die and be done wi' than be dodging to escape every corner for fear of there being an open grave waitin' ready for me. But take the mare, and Ezra shall come and drive you, and if you dunno get back till the following week it wonno matter much. But you'd better get out and walk up all the hills to ease the mare, and down 'em because it's dangerous. You con do as you like on the level. It's your way of enjoying a ride, but aye, mon, there binna any pleasure equal to riding behind a hoss that has got an idea it mon beat the wind and outstrip the swallows. If you find that fellow Scott hanno kept his word, and is workin' that hoss again before it is fit, dunno make any bones about it but call in the police, and I'll stand the racket. I've an idea that he's the kind of chap who only tells the truth when he is out of stock wi' lies, and that dunno often happen."

Sam had instructions to meet Joe with the horse and trap at Whitehurst. It was a skittish horse, only just broken in the shafts, and which had nearly had a smash-up on entering the town, for the horse had taken fright at the sight of a travelling circus and had run away, scattering the little groups of people who still lingered in the streets discussing the speeches delivered at a political meeting which had been held at the Town Hall. In the hands of a less experienced driver, serious consequences might have ensued; but Sam, like his master, never lost his nerve, and was equal to almost any occasion that might arise, and, turning the runaway into a street which he knew led to a steep hill, he let him go at his own pace, until he had thoroughly winded him, and got him once more under control. All this Sam reported to his

master, who at once took the reins, and said "All reet; if this hoss has ambitions to beat the telegraph in gettin' there, now's his chance. I'm going to turn his face towards the equator, and his tail towards the north pole, and he con go at his own rate unless it is too slow. It binna a neet to go dandering along as if it was a first-class funeral. Howd fast, Sam, and shut your eyes and say your prayers if you are freetened. I'm going to teach this hoss a lesson he wonno forget. Gee!"

The whip cracked, the horse, nervous and distraught with his previous experience, sprang right into the air, only to receive a sharp blow across the back with the whip. He flung up his head, his nostrils distended, a wild fire in his eyes, and the next moment he bolted. Through the now deserted streets of the town he dashed at a terrific pace, but never once did the driver seek to check him. A cat, sitting in the middle of the road, making night hideous with its song, remained until the horse was nearly upon it, secure as it doubtless thought in its agility. It remained a second too long, for the wheel of the trap struck it; there was a squeal of pain and the next moment it lay dead.

"He'll sing no more solos," said Joe as he felt the trap jolt. "A cat that hanno sense to clear when a hoss and trap is coming binna fit to live. It's to be hoped he has made his will and has lived a decent life, for there wonno much time for a deathbed repentance. I guess he dinna know what hit him. Git, owd man! You've got to improve on this when we get into the country. It's six good miles to the Red Acres, and I want to see if you con beat Briton. If you con you shall have a hot mash to-neet and an extra hatful of oats to-morrow."

The town was soon left behind and the pace was more than maintained, and Joe was leaning eagerly forward, and every time the horse seemed inclined to slacken the warning "Git!" came from his lips.

"All reet, there?" he asked Sam, when they had travelled nearly a couple of miles. "You are very quiet; you binna freetened, binna you? I expect you've bin counting up your sins and wondering what your chances are in the next life?"

"Na! I'm never much afraid when you are driving. I've never known anybody who con handle hosses like you. They seem to know directly you get howd of the reins."

"Of course they do. There binna any four-legged creature much more knowin' than a hoss, and not many two-legged ones either. A monkey's sharper, but not so reliable, and a widow that's had three husbands is more cute; but a hoss has a deal of sense in that long head of his. It knows directly a timid driver gets howd of the reins and acts accordingly. Half the secret of managing hosses is in making them understand that you're not afraid of them and mean to be boss. I've heard say that it is the same wi' wives," and he gave Sam a dig in the ribs with his elbow, for it was notorious at the Red Acres that in his house the grey mare led the team; "but I can't say. That's outside my experience altogether. It sounds reasonable, though."

Just at that moment they entered an avenue of beeches, when, a little ahead, they heard a cry of "Help!"

"There's something goin' on down yonder that shouldna be," he said. "What's in the wind, I wonder? Take the reins, Sam. If there is any fighting to be done, I'm quicker on my feet than you,

and look more like Napoleon Bonaparte. You might pass for the Duke of Wellington, if you had some fresh legs and a new body and a handsomer face."

By this time they had arrived close to where a horse lay, with both shafts of the trap broken, and Sam brought his horse up with a sharp tug just in time.

Joe gripped his whipstock, jumped out before the trap had actually stopped, and rushed up to where he saw a man trying to lift another in his arms.

"What's up?" he asked. "Somebody drunk?"

"Why, Joe, is that you?" asked Rufus. "I'm more glad to see you than I con tell. There's been an accident, and Ezra, I'm afraid, is killed."

"An accident! What kind of an accident? Horse fallen and broken the shafts. How did it happen?"

"I dunno know. We were coming along all reet, when suddenly the horse stumbled and we were both thrown out."

"What have you had to drink?" asked Joe, who even in the most trying circumstances could not forbear a jibe at his brother. "Ginger pop binna answerable for this. But give me howd of the lad. Maybe he binna as much hurt as you think."

Ezra, as if to confirm this, gave a groan.

"Bring the lamp here, Sam," shouted Joe, "but keep howd of the hoss's head."

By the light of the lamp Joe soon ascertained two things—first, that the horse was quite dead, and, second, that Ezra was not only alive, but that his hurts were not so serious as at first the farmer had feared. He had fallen on his head, which was badly cut, and the blood was oozing freely from two wounds, and the blow had knocked him senseless, but he was quickly recovering.

"Here, Sam, help me to lift him into the trap, and then drive as though a pack of wolves were at your heels to Dr. Gilmour's. Then come back and fetch Rufus and me. We conno leave this hoss and trap here or there'll be another accident."

"Take him to my house and then fetch the doctor to him," said Rufus. "Tell Lucy to put him to bed and that we will be along presently, and be sure to say I'm not hurt."

"Hallo!" exclaimed Joe, "what's this? Well, upon my word, if it binna a rope," and he pulled at it to find that one end was fast to a tree. "There's more in this than there seems. Did you see anybody, Rufe?"

"Aye, I thought I saw two men jump over the gate there as I struggled to my feet. I shouted to 'em to help, but they disappeared; and so I came to the conclusion that I'd been mistaken, for if they had been men they would ha' stopped and given a hand."

"They were two precious rascals, I'll be bound," said Joe, "and I'd like the horsewhippin' of them. Dunno you see that it has been done on purpose? It's either a fool's trick or a rogue's plot, and it's my opinion that it's the latter. Ha' they taken anything from you?"

"No, I think not," Rufus said, feeling in his pockets, "but there's no tellin' what they might ha' done if you hadna come along. I've a kind of notion I heard one of 'em say something about a mess and the wrong man; but I conno be sure. It seems like a dream."

"That's it!" exclaimed Joe. "I think I've got the hang of it. It wonno you they were after, so you needn't be stuck up about it. It was me, or I'll gi' a whole threepenny-bit at the collection on Sunday. They were out to catch a whale and they only caught

a herrin'. They wanted a hoss dealer and they caught a Methody preacher. It would ha' been fun to ha' seen their faces when they discovered their mistake."

"But why should they want to injure you?" asked Rufus. "You hanno any enemies that I know of—at least none that would try and kill you. You hurt folks' feelings sometimes, but everybody knows that you've got a kind heart."

"My dear Rufe, it wonno me they were after—it was my money. They reckoned on havin' a fine haul to-neet, I'll be bound; but they would ha' been mistaken in any case. As it is they ha' killed me a good hoss and smashed a trap. I shall expect you to help me to make it good, Rufe. I conno afford to stand losses like this every day. If you go driving about the country wi' my hosses, I expect you'll stand the racket."

"Dinna forget that I was sent out partly on your business," said Rufus. "But I've great reason to be thankful I escaped so well, and I'll do my part towards the loss. I'm more anxious about the lad than anything else."

"Well, he'll be as reet as rain in a fortneet, take my word for it," said Joe. "What I'm most anxious about is that those two scalliwags should get laid by the heels in jail for a few months. But let us push this trap into this field. You pull and I'll push, or I'll pull and you push. As for the hoss, he'll have to stop till to-morrow. How is it you escaped so well, when Ezra nearly got his ticket?"

"The fact is," replied Rufus, "I lighted on the horse's back. If the poor creature hanno been killed he might ha' kicked me; as it was I got off wi' a bad shaking."

"Well, it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good.

I lose a hoss, but I keep my brother. I might ha' been consulted, however, which I could afford to part wi' best."

"Which would it ha' been, I wonder?" asked Rufus.

"I wonder! But it binna any use wastin' words o'er it. It's Hobson's choice and I'm not going to grumble or pull a long face o'er it."

Soon Sam was back, bringing Dr. Gilmour with him, who reported that Ezra was all right, and that he had left him eating a good supper, his sore head not having affected his appetite; and the Doctor feeling anxious about Rufus had insisted on accompanying Sam to see for himself.

"Thank you, Doctor," said Rufus. "It was very kind of you to come so far this cold night; but I'm no worse, thank God!"

"No patient, no fee," Joe interjected. "It binna fair, Rufe, to do Gilmour out of the chance of earning an honest penny. Sure you dunno want a dose of quinine or ginger?"

"Never felt better in my life. The only thing that is the matter wi' me is that I am ravenously hungry."

"Then jump in behind wi' Sam, and the doctor and I will sit in front. I like to keep company wi' a man who con talk intelligently. By the way, did you see Scott? and what about that hoss of his?"

"Both Scott and the hoss are dead," was the surprising answer. "He kept it in for a few days, and then took it out, and it fell dead. Somehow Scott got caught with the shaft as the horse fell and he got under it and was crushed so badly he died the next night."

"I'm sorry for the hoss," rejoined his brother laconically. Then, after a pause, he added, "I hope that owd hoss knew before he departed this life of what ha' happened. If so, I guess he'd die happy."

CHAPTER XXI.

A PAIR OF RASCALS.

"Some men ha' sold themselves to the devil, and when they've got the money he has picked their pocket."—J. W.

THAT same evening two strangers had turned in at the Red Lion at Summerton and ordered a quart of mulled ale each and requested to be served with supper. It was a raw, cold evening, and the little company assembled, with native politeness made way for the two newcomers to share the fire.

"Cowd, mister?" said Andrew James, addressing the younger of them, who was rubbing his hands as if they were numb.

"Freezing! My hands are like lumps of ice," he replied.

"Come far?"

"Aye."

"Going on?" asked another.

"Yes; to Stourbridge. We are on our way to the Potteries. Perhaps, Charlie," he said, addressing his companion, who had drawn up to the fire, "these gentlemen wouldn't mind having a drink at our expense." This was said with an air of princely generosity as the landlord put the mulled ale on the table.

"Certainly," replied the older man. "Sup your glasses up, lads; and the landlord will fill them again, and charge it to my account. Stuff like this warms

the cockles of your heart," he added, taking a long swig at the ale. A buzz of commendation went round at such unwonted generosity, and the regular customers began to pity those that were not present to share in the good luck that had thus unexpectedly come to them.

The men were well dressed, though the linen of one of them seemed rather frayed and soiled. The younger man, whom his comrade called Stephen, displayed a good deal of flash jewellery. He had two or three rings on his fingers with what looked to be diamonds in rather a poor setting. He was slimly built and had rather a good-looking face. Charlie, on the other hand, was a thick-set man, with a dark, heavy countenance, beetle brows, and a long beard, which hid a course, sensual mouth.

The men were evidently in an appreciative mood, for they not only praised the ale and the cold beef and pickles the landlady set out for them, but praised everything, and blessed their lucky stars they had fallen on such comfortable quarters.

"I wish, Charlie, we could stop here all night," said Stephen. "My feet are blistered, and I'm nearly tired out."

"How far did you say it was to Stourbridge?" he asked.

"Three miles," was the reply.

"Ah, well," he replied, "we have to do it, and there is no good grousing. We shall feel better after a rest."

"You can stay here and welcome," said the landlord. "We have two or three beds at liberty, and we will do our best to make you comfortable."

"Am sorry, sir," replied Charlie, "but it can't be

done; but fill up again, lads, and after a pipe we will make a fresh start."

At this additional proof of the liberality of the strangers, the little company drew closer round the fire, and the atmosphere of noisy good fellowship filled the place.

"Excuse me, sir," said the elder, addressing the landlord, "we are strangers in these parts. Have you any notable men about here?"

"Oh, nobody very outstanding. There is Lord Flintshire living at the Castle. That is three miles away. And Sir John Crookworth at the Hall. There is nobody else among the gentry that counts for much. But we've two brothers called Wentworth, both notable in their own way. Rufus, who lives in the village, is a Methodist and a great rose grower. Joe, a farmer and horse dealer, is about as queer as they are made."

"I think we heard of him, Charlie, at Whitehurst. Somebody told us that if we called we should see a fine stud of horses, but neither of us are much gone on horses, so we forgot it. Sorry we missed him, though."

"You wouldna have found him in if you had gone," said Gaffer Wilcox. "He's gone to a sale of horses, and he wunna be home till the last train, which dunno get into Whitehurst till ten o'clock. Sam, the hostler, towd me, because he has to meet him wi' the trap at Whitehurst. There binna any train stops at Summerton after eight."

"Oh, well, it does not matter," replied Stephen, looking across at his friend. "He does not seem our sort. I suppose if he's a farmer he'll be as poor as a church mouse."

"Well, stranger," replied Wilcox, "if you had as

much as he's got you'd be able to buy up Lord Flintshire and Sir John Crookworth into the bargain. He makes hatfuls of money. He is the cutest man wi' horses in this county, I dunno care where the next comes from."

"Miserly, I guess?" said Stephen. "Such men usually are."

"Not a bit of it," replied the landlord. "Wentworth and I dunno get on well together, but I'll give even the devil his due. He is very liberal to anybody he takes to. I've known lots of folks he has helped, and he does like to take the big 'uns down a peg. Nobody dares stand up to the gentry like him."

And forthwith one story after another was told, first by one and then another, of Joe's jokes and eccentricities, each of which caused great mirth and laughter.

"After all, Charlie, he seems worth knowing," said the younger man. "The next time we come this way we must look him up, and you might recommend him to your cousin, Lord Linworthy, if he is such a good judge of horseflesh. Sorry, gentlemen; we must be going. I suppose there is no such thing as a trap, or carriage, to be had in the village that will take us to Stourbridge?"

"No," replied the landlord. "I have an old trap, but my horse died two years ago and it didn't pay to buy another."

"Ah, well, we must foot it. Good-bye, all."

A chorus of "good-nights" followed them out into the night. They walked in the direction of Stourbridge for a little distance, doubled back, passed the public house in the shadow of the houses, and then hurried for quite a quarter of a mile.

"We've run it fine, Charlie," said the younger man;

"but we pumped those Johnnies dry. There will be no suspicions of us, and it was far better spending the time there than in a ditch a night like this. I hope we shall get to the trees before they come."

"Aye, it was a happy idea of yours to make 'em think we were going to Stourbridge. But I couldn't see your lay when you asked about a horse and trap. Suppose the landlord had possessed one. You'd have been in a tight corner."

"I knew he hadn't," replied his comrade. "You saw me go out to the bar. Well, I asked the maid and got to know that nobody in the village hired out. Don't you see, it made them think we wanted to get to Stourbridge as quickly as possible."

"Capital!" cried his mate. "You improve, 'pon my word. I hope we haven't much farther to go. I'm winded."

"It's just here. I can see the shadow of the trees. My only fear was we might have stopped too late. I've allowed twenty minutes for him to drive from Whitehurst. One thing's certain, he has not gone past. I kept my ears open. The train may be late, and we may have to wait."

They had laid their plans skilfully, and were confident of success. One of them drew down his sleeve a short stick with an ugly-looking knob at the end, and the other adjusted a dark lantern and lighted it, although the night was not dark.

They were out to rob—maybe to murder—although they did not admit the latter even to themselves. It was not their intention to kill, but they wanted the gold that they expected was in Joe Wentworth's pocket, and they meant to have it, and so they lay listening.

There was a crash and a cry and the horse lay in the road and the two men lay stunned and helpless.

Face page 197.

"I hope he won't be long," said Mason. "My blood is freezing in this wind. It cuts like a knife."

"Aye. When it is over we must make a run for it. My feet are like stones. There is one thing, however, about it in our favour. Nobody will turn out to-night that is not obliged to do so; and so there is less danger of us being interfered with. Hush! I can hear a horse trotting."

In a moment a rope was pulled and fastened in a slip knot to a tree and carried across the road. "Get ready, directly I say 'Away,'" said Mason. "And don't hit too hard if you have to hit at all. You go for the groom and I'll tackle Wentworth."

Very distinctly now they could hear the horse's hoofs beating on the road in a sharp trot, and the two rascals drew closer to the tree trunk, though there was no danger of their being seen from the road.

Now the trap had turned the corner, and they could hear the grinding of the wheels over some newly laid gravel they had noticed, some three hundred yards from their hiding place. Nearer and nearer it came, and they held their breath with suppressed excitement. They had just time to see dimly the two figures in the conveyance, when there was a crash and a cry, and the horse fell in the road, and the two men lay stunned and helpless.

"Away!" cried Mason, and the two men sprang down on the road to complete their task. Corbett turned on his lantern for a moment to gaze on the outstretched figure of a man who lay full length across the horse's back, which had pitched on its head and dislocated its neck, and was quite dead.

"Help!" cried the figure as the lantern flashed in his face and he tried to move.

Corbett gave a cry, for the face he gazed upon was

not the sharp features of Joe Wentworth, but the rounded and more benign countenance of his brother Rufus.

"Good heavens, Mason!" he exclaimed, "we've made a mess of it and have downed the wrong chap. Listen! the other trap is coming. Come along; it is too late to mend matters now."

"We shall get caught," he complained, as his comrade stayed to thrust his hand into the pocket of the man who lay senseless. The next moment he sprang over the hedge and was lost in the shadow of the trees, to be immediately followed by his comrade in crime, who was beating his retreat swearing at the unpropitious ending to their night's adventure.

CHAPTER XXII.

JOE AS SHERLOCK HOLMES.

"It takes a cute man to be a thief, but if he is cute enough he wonno be a thief at all."—J. W.

FOR a fortnight the police were busy trying to get a clue which would put them on the track of the miscreants who had caused the death of the old grey mare, and imperilled the lives of Rufus and Ezra. They had at first thought that the two men who had called at the Red Lion might have something to do with it, and, after closely examining the landlord and his customers, came to the conclusion that to follow up that clue would only be waste of time. From time to time they reported progress to the master of the Red Acres, who chaffed them most unmercifully every time they had to admit failure.

"It seems to me," he said, "you fellows binna worth your bread and butter by a long chalk. You ought to resign and go in for some nice, slow, respectable business that dunno require brains to run it. Sellin' cockles and mussels on the sands at a seaport town might suit you. Here, a hoss is killed outright, and a sharp lad gets a crack on the head, so that the only thing that has worked efficiently ever since is his stomach, and a local preacher of a respectable family runs the risk of being summoned for bein' in charge of a hoss and trap when he was drunk and incapable.

Mind, nobody hanno said it was so yet, but there is no tellin' what they will say, and you come in once every two or three days and get a square meal, and calmly tell us that there binna any finding the men who did it! Well, all I con say is that it's a disgrace to you, and you ought to be ashamed to take your wages. If fellows like you were sent to find the Wrekin you wouldna be able to discover it. You'd walk o'er it, and think a mole had bin busy during the neet."

All this, and much more of the same sort of banter, they received with good temper, with the exception of a choleric sergeant, who lost his temper nearly every time he met Wentworth, who was greatly delighted by the fact.

"He fizzes as easily as a pop bottle," he said. "He is as fond of me as a beggar is of a savage dog who has snapped at his calves. If he was as clever at finding criminals as he is at losing his temper, he'd soon be at the top of the tree."

But in the meantime Joe was doing, as he told his brother, some detective work on his own. On the day after the occurrence he went in company with the sergeant and carefully examined and measured the footprints which had been left in the field. While stooping down he discovered in the grass a shell button, which he quietly appropriated without saying anything to the officer. He then cut off a piece of the rope of which the sergeant had taken possession, saying he intended it as a keepsake.

He had noticed two men at the horse sale eyeing his closely, and one of them had spoken to him in commendation of a handsome chestnut Joe had bought.

"Oh, the horse is all reet," he replied. "He has

one or two minor defects, which prevents him bein' a first-prizer. I've seen a wuss hoss in a cab, but I've some at the Red Acres that would beat him and feel ashamed to ha' bin put in competition wi' him."

"The Red Acres? Where is that? I never heard of it before," one said.

"Then your geographical education has bin neglected," replied Joe. "It's a place where we grow men, train hosses, and take in fools. Were you thinkin' of givin' us a call?"

"No," was the reply. "But still, if you've horses as good as you say I might look you up when I'm in need of one."

Joe eyed him more closely, and then said, "Well, you mon bring the money wi' you, if you come. We never sell a hoss on trust, and I dunno take cheques from strangers. I had one framed and glazed for a long time to remind me that every cheque binna worth the amount it is filled in for, and there are fellows in the world who believe that honesty is so precious it shouldna be practised except when you're obliged. I'm a trustful sort of chap, but one of my maxims is 'Love your neighbour, but keep your eye on him.'"

Joe afterwards learnt from a dealer whom he could trust that these men had been asking questions about him all round, and he determined to have nothing to do with them. After thinking matters over when he went to bed on the night of the outrage, he came to the conclusion that it might be worth while to try and learn what became of them when they left the sale at Shrewsbury. He therefore took the afternoon train to that town, and on arriving looked carefully for a shop where twine and rope was sold, and at length discovered one in the High Street. "I want some

rope like this," he said, showing the piece he had brought with him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wentworth," replied the shopkeeper, "but we sold the last of that particular sort yesterday."

"How do you know my name is Wentworth?" he asked.

"Oh," replied the man with a laugh, "you are far better known in Shrewsbury than you think. Your photo, for one thing, appeared in the paper at the time of the burglary at Lord Harringay's."

"I hope they didna say that I did it," replied Joe. "I'd just like to get hold of the fellow who put my photo in the paper. I wonder how he got hold of it?"

"Well, you know, young Howard snap-shotted you one day when you were at the Horse Show."

"If I'd caught him at it I would ha' doubled him up and put him inside his camera. It would be rather awkward if I did want to commit a burglary. But con you tell me who bought that last piece of rope yesterday?"

"It was a stranger. I did not know the man. Never set eyes on him before."

"Well, when you did set eyes on him, what did you see? Conno you remember what he was like? Did he look like a bishop or a hangman?"

"Well, as far as I can remember, he was a horsey kind of man, if you'll excuse me saying so, Mr. Wentworth. I don't remember anything more about him, but I noticed there was another man waiting outside for him, who wore a check waistcoat of rather a pronounced pattern. There is nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Oh, no; only it would have been a good job if the fellow who bought that rope had used it first to hang

his mate, and then ha' practised on himself. Dunno you tell anybody I've bin making inquiries. But I want to find those two chaps more than I want anythin' else, and I'd give a five pound note to see 'em walking into this shop just now."

"I'm on the scent, as the man said who was sitting on a hamper of eau de Cologne," Joe muttered to himself as he went to a restaurant to get a cup of tea. "I rather like this detective business. If I fail as a hoss dealer, I mon try and get on at Scotland Yard. Now, what's the next move?"

That was a question not easily settled. He was convinced that these two men were the guilty ones, and he was determined to find them if possible. But how? For an hour he sat patiently after partaking of a good meal, with his eyes closed and his head thrown back, thinking it out. The waiter came to the conclusion that he was asleep. Joe was not asleep, but baffled. He did not want to take the police into his confidence, for he greatly desired the pleasure of "taking it out of them" by doing himself what they were failing to accomplish.

He then began to bestir himself. He went to the auctioneer at the horse sale, but he knew nothing of the men. He had observed that they were at the sale, and was quite sure that they were strangers in the town. After making other inquiries, he returned home, satisfied at the information he had gathered, but completely at a loss as to how to turn it to account. For three days he searched the surrounding villages and contiguous towns, but nobody seemed to have any knowledge of the strangers. On the fourth day he was compelled to go to Liverpool, to meet a couple of horses coming from Ireland. While standing awaiting the arrival of the steamer, suddenly he caught

sight of a check waistcoat, and there, sure enough, were the two men he was so anxious to find. He made his way to them, and exclaimed, "Good afternoon, gentlemen! You hanno bin to the Red Acres to see my stud yet."

The men gave a start on recognising him, and seemed a little confused, and then one replied, "No, not yet, Mr. Wentworth; but we shall be coming before long."

"Do; but you munno be long about it. I've bin doin' so well lately in the hoss trade that I shall ha' to be thinkin' about retiring or becoming a millionaire. I dunno want to be the latter, because it mon be a worry to ha' so much money comin' in every day that you dunno know how to spend it. I tell you what: suppose you run down to-morrow? I'll provide lodgings for the neet, and you con ha' a look at my hosses, and if you feel inclined to buy, well and good; if not, there's no harm done. The fare binna a killing matter to gents like you, and you'll ha' a feed that will bust all the buttons off your waistcoats. I see you've lost one already," he continued, addressing the one whose name was Corbett.

The man glanced down, but was not at all concerned with what issue the lost button might have upon his fortunes, but they were both astonished at this invitation. They could hardly believe their own ears. They had discussed only that morning as to whether it would be possible to repair their mistake and still get at the money they coveted, and here was the ripe pear dropping into their mouths as it were. Mason gave his companion a wink, and replied, "Thank you, Mr. Wentworth. The fact is, we have received an order from a customer in Australia for a few good horses, and we were wondering where we

should find them of the quality we need. We will gladly accept your invitation."

"I'll guarantee the quality of my hosses is good enough, even if you wanted them for the Shah of Persia. Come down wi' the train arrivin' at Summerton at 4.30, and I'll send Sam to meet you. You'll know him, because he's the handsomest man in our parts. Dunno forget, and I'll ask a few friends to meet you and we'll make a jolly neet of it. I might ha' invited my brother to come; he's an interestin' chap is Rufe; but some rascals threw him out of the trap the other neet by tying a rope across the road. It was a nasty trick to serve an owd fellow, who hanno done any harm beyond that he's fond of tellin' foaks how to behave themselves; but every man has his hobby. He's got off, I'm glad to say, wi' a bad shaking, and will be all reet in a few days. The police, I believe, suspect it was some of the mischievous lads who were out for a lark, which binna amiss for them, and must ha' cost 'em great mental exertion before they arrived at it."

During this speech Joe had been watching the faces of the two men closely, and as he said afterwards, "they couldna help their eyes tellin' the tale their tongues refused to speak."

"What a shame!" Mason ejaculated. "It's to be hoped that whoever did it will be caught."

"They wunno on this side the next hundred years if it depends on the police. Whoever it was, men or boys, I'd like to ha' the horsewhipping of 'em. As it is, they killed an owd hoss of which I was as fond as most men are of their mother-in-law, and broke the shafts of a decent trap. However, I didna come to Liverpool to talk o'er my troubles; but I'll make up for it by the fun we'll have when you come to-

morrow. Ta! ta! Here's the boat comin' in, and I mon look after some hosses I have on board. They are coming from Ireland, and one's a Home Ruler and the other is a Unionist; so I'll ha' to keep 'em from kickin' one another to pieces. Even the hosses and pigs go in for politics in Ireland."

CHAPTER XXIII.

RUN TO EARTH.

"I've heard say the cow is an ass. I'm not saying it binna true, but I've known some asses that could kick tremendously." —J. W.

"CHARLIE!" exclaimed Mason, when Joe had gone, "pinch me to see if I'm awake. If that ain't the finest stroke of luck that has come our way for many a long day!"

"Maybe; but how are we to take advantage of it —that's the question. Let's go and have a drink, and think it over. The other business is off now."

"Yes! It's evident nobody suspects us. That's one thing, and it is equally evident that that queer bloke has heaps of money. What is not clear is how we are to get hold of some of it!"

"Leave it to me. I'll think out a plan. If we stop all night at his farm, it will go hard if we don't carry some of it away."

Meanwhile Joe was chuckling to himself and having, as he afterwards said, "the time of his life."

Next day Sam met the train, driving the bay horse, Captain, who could be relied upon to play tricks whenever his driver gave him a loose rein or touched his ears with the whip.

"Gi' 'em plenty for their money," was his master's instructions, "but dunno break their necks. I want my penn'orth of fun, too."

"Reet," replied Sam with a grin; "I'll take care they shanno go to sleep on their journey."

And he did. That ride was full of thrills and hair-breadth escapes. Never were two men more heartily glad to get safely to the end of their journey than they.

Joe greeted them very cordially. "Sam has brought you through safely, I see," he said. "He dunno always. I shouldna like to say he has killed anybody outreet, but he has freetened a few out of their wits. He looks all reet, but I wunno say that he binna a bit mad at times. His fits are regulated by the moon, I expect. Come in, only mind the dogs dunno bite you. Owd Ben, the bulldog, knows a gentleman from a rogue most times; but dogs, like men, sometimes make mistakes."

In the parlour there were five men to whom they were introduced in the following order: "This is my brother Rufe, who nearly went by express to 'kingdom come' the other neet. And this is Sergeant Beale; he's in the police force, and is good at catching game when it is already shot. And this is the Chief of the county police. And this is a friend of mine from Shrewsbury, and who, I believe, whenever there is a hanging to be done at the jail, has the pleasure of furnishing the rope. You see I have a good many friends in the force. I've to do things on the windward side of the law sometimes, and so I keep the reet side of these chaps; and, last of all, here is the Vicar of Summerton, who is a good sort as far as parsons go. Now I've done the honours, come in to dinner. It is piping hot—a good, fat turkey, stuffed with sausage; a leg of pork; potatoes, cauliflower, and turnips—all home grown. After that, apple dumplings, and bread and cheese and coffee. If you'd like to add to the menu speak up and we will oblige, if possible. It

may be the last good meal some of us may have for a long time, so we will make the best of it. The Vicar has a famous sermon on the reet use of opportunity; now is the time to put the sermon into practice."

And, to do them credit, they did, and in every respect it fulfilled Joe's promise. There were a good many jokes flying across the table, mostly at the expense of the Vicar and Rufus, who, however, took all the banter in very good part.

As the coffee was handed round Joe rose, and said, "Lydia, bring Ezra in. He's got his head cracked, and if there is any fun goin' he ought to be in at it. I believe in fair play all round."

After the lad had sheepishly entered, with his head still bound up, Joe continued, "Now, you'll wonder why I've axed you all here! I hanno told anybody, except the Vicar and Lydia; but now I may as well say this binna a birthday party. You all know what happened the other neet. Rufe and this lad was jogging home wi' the owd grey mare in the trap, when they suddenly got pitched out, and might ha' bin killed as the poor owd hoss was. Well, Rufe landed on the hoss's back, which was soft; and the lad landed on his own head, which was hard, and they both had a narrow escape. The Vicar, who knows all about it, says it was Providence. If so, we are all obliged to Providence; for though Rufe is sometimes a great worry to me, I dunno want to lose him yet—in fact, not till I'm sure about where he would land in the other world. As for Ezra, he's anxious to complete his education in hosses before he leaves the Red Acres to go anywhere else. Now we all know how the accident occurred. Some rascals had tied a rope across the road and brought down the hoss, neck and crop.

Well, the sergeant and his men ha' bin busy following clues that led nowhere. Nay, nay, sergeant," he added, as the officer began to interpose; "let me tell the story in my own way. If you dunno like it, sit still and digest the turkey and apple dumplin' till I have done, and have your say after. Well, being naturally of an inquirin' turn of mind I went on the hunt myself, and I've found the scamps."

"What!" exclaimed the two policemen, springing to their feet. "Found them? Where?"

"Where you'd never think of lookin' for 'em," replied Joe. "They are at the Red Acres."

During this speech Corbett and Mason had been looking decidedly uncomfortable, but at the last sentence they began to breathe again freely.

"One of the servants?" said the Chief of Police. "You remember you said you could trust them all, Mr. Wentworth."

"So I con. We hanno anybody here regular that would do a dirty action like that. I've a little button here," he said pulling the one he had found out of his waistcoat pocket, "and as I dunno like to keep other foaks' property, I gi' it back to its owner," and he flung it across the table to Corbett. "I picked it up near the gap you came through in the hedge. You canno afford to lose it, for you hanno too many buttons on at best!"

"What do you mean?" asked Corbett. "Do you mean to say I did it? It is a lie, gentlemen! I'll swear——"

"Wait a minute," replied Joe, "I hanno finished, and if you're going to tell a lie you might as well tell a whopper while you are at it. They are all the same price.

"Mr. Bennion, you keep a rope shop, dunno you?

Will you tell which of these two beauties came into your shop and bought a rope on the day of the hoss fair?"

"That one," he replied, pointing to Corbett.

"And that was the kind of rope he bought, wunno it?"

"Yes, sir. The last piece I had got."

"That was the very rope, gentlemen, which finished the poor owd grey mare. And, if you'll notice, gentlemen, the button I've returned is own brother to those on his waistcoat, and he's one short! Want any more?" he asked.

The two men were silent and hung down their heads.

"Now, sergeant, you con just do what you like wi' 'em. I've caught the fish; you con cook 'em. If the Vicar wonno here I'd tell them in Saturday language what I think of 'em; and if the two police officers wonno here, I'd flog 'em within an inch of their lives. But I never con have all the fun I like. Sorry to break up this pleasure party, but I've promised 'em lodgings somewhere for the neet, and as we conno do wi' 'em at the Red Acres, you mon take 'em to Whitehurst. The horse and trap is ready."

The two miscreants, feeling they were trapped, offered no resistance as the sergeant slipped the handcuffs on, and soon they were on their way to a prison cell.

"The house feels sweeter now they're gone," said Joe. "But I never saw two chaps look more taken in than they did when I tabled that button. It kind of fastened them up. Now, Vic., what do you think of yours truly as a detective of the A1 variety?"

"You have done excellently, Mr. Wentworth, but we did not need this new example. You have sur-

prised us so often that, if you will permit a paradox, you have almost ceased to surprise us at anything you do."

"I dunno know what a parabox is, but it appears to be a box that is open and shut at the same time—a thing that is and isn't—and I don't like to have anything to do wi' such. It seems to be a bit like a young fellow's fortune whom I met wi' in New South Wales. He had a fortune of £20,000, but it was locked up in Chancery, and he borrowed twopence off me to pay his debts and he has never been able to pay it back. His fortune is still in Chancery, and he is in the workhouse, filling in the time wi' tellin' the big things he is going to do when he gets it. But here is our Rufe as mute as a drum wi' the end knocked out. What is the matter wi' thee? I hope you binna jealous?"

"Nay," replied Rufus. "I was thinking what a terrible thing it must be to go about devising mischief against your fellows, and be ready to maim and murder them in order to get their money. We know now for certain it was you they were after, and all to get the money that you had sold the horses for at the fair."

"Aye, and they would ha' got a pretty good haul in gettin' that. It was my best day for many a month. They would ha' been able to buy a penn'orth o' nuts every day as long as they lived. But I wonno fool enough to carry all that money about wi' me. I got the auctioneer to bank it, and send me a cheque the next day. So they would only ha' got a couple of sovereigns or thereabouts. It takes a sharp man to be a thief, but there is mony an honest man who is sharper than the best of 'em. A fellow that has brains to be a successful thief has brains enough to be

more successful if he dunno steal. What do you say, Vicar?"

"You are entirely right, sir. It pays to be honest."

"Well, I'm glad to hear you say that, because I'm honest. And I suppose you'll make a collection in church to help pay for the owd grey mare I've lost."

"I would willingly, Mr. Wentworth, if you assured me you were in need of it. But there is a general impression abroad that you are well off, and I could not appeal to men poorer than yourself to help, could I?"

"Well, there is this about it," replied Joe. "Foaks often say that the poor come to church for what they con get in the way of coals and blankets; but nobody con say that of me; I hanno had a bit of coal as big as a lump of sugar; and as for the blankets, I've never so much as seen one, though sometimes I have lain in bed and shivered like an elephant wi' the ague, and the Vic. there never so much as axed me if I needed anythin' to keep me warm either day or neet. I'd come and join the Methodists, only they couldna stand two Wentworths. It wouldna be fair to any Church to saddle 'em wi' both of us."

"It would be more like you to give the Vicar a five pound note to buy either coals or blankets for somebody else," his brother replied, laughing. "I think you ought as a thanksgiving offering, for having escaped the other neet the shaking I got, and maybe something wuss."

"Oh, that's it. I wondered what you two were concocting when you were whisperin' together just now. I thought you had some designs on my person or purse."

"No, no, Mr. Wentworth," said the Vicar. "We

really were saying how cleverly you had caught those men, who richly deserve to be punished."

"They'll get punished reet enough," said Joe; "for two years at least they will be kept out of mischief and improvin' their education.

"But look here, Vic. There is somethin' in what Rufe says. I got off wi' a fright when I saw Rufe lyin' there, for I thought he'd broken his pledge, and I've made up my mind I'll gi' ten pounds to some good object. Now the chapel foaks are busy trying to get a fund going to build a new Sunday School, and seeing Rufe, who is top sawyer amongst them, got a fright, and shaking as well, it does seem in fairness it ought to go to them. But then that would be encouragin' heresy, accordin' to the Vicar of Stourbridge. You've got a fund goin' for some new lamps and not before they are needed either. Now, there is ten pounds," and he placed a note for that amount on the table. "You are my pastor, and you mon decide to which it shall go."

His eyes twinkled with merriment, for it was just such a situation as he delighted in, and waited eagerly for the Vicar's decision.

"Sir," replied the Vicar, "I thank you, but as you rightly remarked, your brother was the sufferer, and was in great danger. I think the money should go to him."

"Take it, Rufe," said his brother. "But what about the heresy?"

"We will run the risks of that," replied Mr. Bird.

"No," said Rufus, "I took no hurt, and ought to be giving something myself for being so wonderfully preserved. You take it, Vicar, and I will give a like amount to the School Fund."

"Certainly not. I must insist on you having it."

"Well," said Joe, "here's another. That's one apiece. I conno have two parsons quarrelling and feightin' in my house about money. It sets a bad example to the servants. But, mind, if either of you say a word about it outside this room, it's pop-goes-the-weasel for ever, so far as I'm concerned. Now I mon go and see how the horses are getting on. I've kept bad company long enough."

At the trial Corbett and Mason pleaded guilty, and got eighteen months' hard labour.

"I'd give 'em two years," said Joe; "but I dunno mind knocking six months off, seeing it was my brother they threw out and not me. If it had bin I should ha' wanted the two years to the last hour. You see, some men's lives are more precious than others. Everyone knows his own value. If Rufe's satisfied, so am I."

CHAPTER XXIV.

GWEN'S CHRISTMAS.

"Things binna always what they seem. I've known some candidates for Parliament who looked as if they couldna tell a lie."—J. W.

GWEN, Rufus Wentworth's adopted daughter, had been happily married to a Methodist minister, whom Joe said she first bewitched and then terrified into making her an offer, for on no other ground could he account for a sensible fellow like Mr. Evans tying himself to such a little autocrat and flipperty-gibbet as she was. "You will always have to let her have her own way if you want any peace in the house," he said. "She either gets it by smiles or tears; so you may as well give in at once." On their wedding day he said to the happy bridegroom, "She looks as bonnie as one of Rufe's roses, but beware of the prickles. I know, as the Methodists say, 'by heart-felt experience.'"

"Don't believe a word he says," retorted Gwen. "He is only vexed that I've got a husband, because it proves he is a false prophet. He has declared a dozen times that no decent man would ever have me, now he is upset because I'm going away."

"Oh, well," replied the farmer, "there will be a lot less talking done when you are gone, but I conno say there will be much less thinkin'. There will only be one master in the house, and that one wonno be the one that wears a white tie."

But in spite of Joe's prognostications the marriage turned out a happy one. The young people visited at intervals both the Red Acres and the Rosary, and it was always an understanding that Christmas should be spent at Summerton, and Joe went, too, as a matter of course. But, after spending three useful years in Birmingham, Mr. Evans moved to Sunford, and one day he announced to his wife that the usual Christmas arrangements could not be carried out, at least for that year.

"What a shame!" exclaimed Mrs. Evans. "Now we shall not be able to go home for Christmas."

"I fear not, dear," replied the minister, "but it is a custom at Sunford to have a United Free Church service, and it falls to us to provide the preacher this year."

"I don't see why people want to listen to so many sermons. In my opinion it's like the appetite for absinthe or whisky. It is simply a habit. Nobody ever thinks of practising one half of the sermons to which they listen."

"That is a very heterodox opinion for a minister's wife," rejoined Mr. Evans with a smile. "It is on the lines of the fisherman's wife calling 'stinking fish,' or the shoemaker advising people to go barefooted."

"I don't care," she said with a pretty pout; "they might let you have Christmas Day free, at any rate. I'm sure you work hard enough all the other days of the year. And I did so want to see dad and Uncle Joe. It seems like an age since I was at home."

"Well, Gwen dear, you remember the old saying, 'If the mountain will not go to Mahomet, then Mahomet must go to the mountain.' Send and invite them all to come and spend Christmas with us!'"

"What a brilliant idea!" she replied, visibly

brightening up and clapping her hands. "Why, of course. You deserve a kiss for that suggestion."

"I often don't get what I deserve," he replied, with affected dolefulness.

"No, if you did you would get something not very pleasant; but you shall be rewarded this once," she said, kissing him. "I'll sit down right away and send the invitations. And what a time we will have! It was really an inspiration on your part to think of it."

Three mornings after, when her husband went to breakfast he found her standing looking out of the window, a hot flush on her cheeks and tears in her eyes. In her hand she was holding a letter.

"It's a shame! Here's a most abusive letter from Uncle Joe, who declares he is not coming at Christmas. It is downright mean, and he says the most horrid things!"

"Oh, well, you ought to know by this time that he does not mean half what he says. He is only poking fun at you, and will be chuckling in his sleeve all the time."

"No, he is in earnest. I know when he is really vexed. Listen to this: 'I don't believe in breaking up old customs, and I am not going to do it for fifty Free Church Councils. As for coming to Sunford, do you imagine I am going to travel sixty miles for a Christmas dinner, when I con have a better one at home, decently cooked?' and the last two words he doubly underlines. As if mine wouldn't be decently cooked! Then he goes on to insult you. He says he 'cannot think anybody wants to hear you preach either at Christmas or any other time. He heard you once and he will die happy if he never hears you again. If you asked to be relieved he is sure the relief will be with the people, and they will willingly

excuse you.' There!" she exclaimed, stamping her foot. "I'll never forgive him! The nasty, grumbling, untruthful old man!"

"Come, come, dear," the minister said, with a laugh; "that is just what I should expect from your uncle. That is a mild dose compared to some he has given me. He doesn't mean it."

"Yes, he does. And if he does not he has no right to say such things. Besides, that is not the worst. 'I always warned you,' he goes on, 'against marrying a parson, and especially a Methodist parson, who has to move about the country every two or three years because the people can't stand him any longer. Besides, you are no more fit for a parson's wife than I am to be an understudy to the Archangel Gabriel. However, the sum and substance of it all is, if you don't come to Summerton there is no Christmas present for you, and I shall save my pocket. I've been feeding a turkey, which is nearly as big as an ostrich, for our Christmas dinner; but as there will only be the housekeeper and myself I shall have him cooked for the carol singers, instead of sending it on to Rufe's.' He finishes off by saying that if we persist in not going to Summerton, neither you nor I need trouble to go near the Red Acres for some months to come. As if we should want to go near him after a letter like that!"

She fairly broke down and wept, and the minister had to comfort her in the usual manner of young husbands for whom the romance of married life has not lost its charm.

Christmas morning was bright, with a twang of frost in the air, when the good folks of Sunford turned out for the service which was held in the Congregational Church, at which Mr. Evans was to preach.

He had the reputation of being the best preacher in the town, and the church, always full on Christmas mornings, was so crowded that some had to sit on the pulpit steps. As the congregation rose to sing the first hymn—

"Hark! the herald-angels sing,
Glory to the new-born King,"

an old man entered the building and stood for a moment gazing, as if bewildered which way to go. He was a most pitiable object, and evidently was suffering from some bronchial affection, for he wheezed at every breath he took. His old coat, which had been given him by the charitable, reached nearly down to his feet and was patched in many places, while the great pockets bulged out, as if stuffed with the doles he had received on his wanderings. A long white beard, dishevelled and ragged, gave a somewhat venerable appearance to a very unprepossessing face, while his iron-grey hair floated out behind a shabby old hat and fell on his shoulders in matted lengths, and his nose was unusually long and full of pimply veins. His old shoes were broken and showed a mass of rags through the rents. As he leaned on his stick one of the stewards went to him and said, "I am very sorry, but I fear every seat is full." He put his hand to his ear and then proceeded to shamble down the aisle, with his stick in one hand and a great bundle in a dirty red handkerchief in the other, until he reached the front, where he paused, leaning on his stick and peering round as if in search of a seat. One of the ministers in the pulpit handed down a spare chair, and the old man sat in the aisle, the cynosure of all eyes. He seemed attentive to the service, and when the collection was taken he fumbled about in his rags and at length brought forth

a battered halfpenny, keeping the young and nervous steward waiting for quite a long time while he found it. After the collection, Mrs. Evans sang a solo, "I know that my Redeemer liveth," from the "Messiah." A deep silence fell on the congregation, for her rendering of it was full of feeling, and her clear voice seemed to carry the note of the great tidings in it. The old man, evidently carried out of himself, muttered audibly when she had finished, "Good! Good! very good!" During the first part of the sermon he sat and nodded approvingly to what the preacher said, but after a time, as though tired, he closed his eyes, and might as well have been asleep. The sermon, fine in conception and beautiful in expression, was a powerful plea for the spirit of common brotherhood in everyday life. After the service was over the congregation soon dispersed, leaving the old man sitting as if in a deep reverie. When nearly everybody had left the building, Mr. Osman, the steward who had first spoken to him, approached, and, touching him on the shoulder, said, "Now, my good man, the service is over. It is time to be going."

"I want to see the parson. Him that preached, I mean," he said.

"What for?" asked Mr. Osman, who was not without experience of those members of the tramp fraternity who frequent places of worship to prey upon the benevolent.

"I want to ax him something," was the reply.

"Oh, well! I'm afraid you cannot see him. The ministers are having a little meeting in the vestry about a United Mission."

"I'll wait. I hanno got nowhere to go, so I'm in no hurry. My Christmas dinner wunno spoil, for I hanno got one."

"Well, here is a shilling. Now, off you go."

"Thank you, governor," he replied, seizing the shilling and putting it into his pocket with marvellous celerity. "The parson said we were all brothers, didna he? Well, a shilling's worth of brotherhood binna much, but it's something. Con yo' tell me where I con get some turkey and plum pudding wi' it?"

"Come, come!" said the steward, now assured that his estimate of him as a begging imposter was correct. "You must be going, or I shall have to call in the police. I've seen your sort before, my man."

"And I've seen yours," replied the old man with a terrific wheeze; "and a poor sort it is," he added, as soon as he could recover his breath.

"What does the poor man want?" asked Mrs. Evans, who, waiting for her husband, had come down to where the steward and the tramp were talking in the chapel.

"He wishes to see Mr. Evans," replied the steward. "I've given him a shilling; but he is not satisfied."

"I want some dinner, ma'am," he wheezed. "There binna any shop open to-day, and I conno eat a shilling, con I? I hanno tasted anythin' since six o'clock this morning. But I forgot I was hungry, ma'am, while you were singing."

For a moment Gwen looked at the bundle of filthy rags and matted hair and repulsive face doubtfully, and then said with a smile, "If you like to come with me I'll find you something to eat."

The two left the sanctuary, the steward having detained Mrs. Evans for a moment to warn her not to trust the old man, as he was sure he was a rank impostor. The folks in the street stopped to give the pair another glance as they walked along. The minister's wife, beautiful, well dressed and

sprightly; the old beggar, with his old coat now and again touching the ground, and big broken shoes, matted hair and shambling gait. They made a contrast that was the theme of conversation at many a dinner table that day. She had to accommodate herself to his pace, which was very slow, and now and again he gasped for breath and stood coughing with his hand on his chest as if it hurt him, until he had regained his breath. All the time he held fast to the bundle in the red handkerchief.

"I'm afraid you are not well," she said; "you ought not to be out with a cough like that; but we have not far to go now," she added kindly. "Our house is in the next street."

"I'd go twice as far, mum, to hear you sing again," he said. "The preacher wunno bad, but that song was worth it all twice over."

"It is very kind of you to say so," replied Mrs. Evans with a blush; "I shall tell my husband what you say."

By this time they had reached the Manse, and Gwen put her visitor in an easy chair by the fire, while she took off her hat and fur-lined jacket—a present from Uncle Joe the Christmas before, and whose promised present of a muff and stole to match she had forfeited by not going to Summerton.

"Dinner will be a little while yet," she said, when she came downstairs. "We are expecting my father and mother by the 12.30 train. Perhaps, if you are very hungry, you would like a mince pie to carry you on till they come."

The tramp nodded his appreciation of this offer, and she brought a plateful of mince pies, and as she gave a glance at his hands, said, "Perhaps you would like a wash first?"

He hesitated for a moment, and then replied: "No; I wunno bother. I'm not very bad. I had a wash the day before yesterday."

"The day before yesterday!" she exclaimed. "Surely you wash once a day, at least?"

"Sometimes I do. But soap and water binna always easy to come by when you're on the road. Besides, it's warmer not to wash so often."

"Oh, well," she said sweetly, "I am mistress here. Come, I will show you the bathroom. I'm sure you'll feel refreshed after a wash in some nice hot water."

The tramp looked doubtful for a moment, and then followed her. While he was washing she slipped down and in a twinkling pulled the red handkerchief from under the chair and had a peep in. Her face lit up and she chuckled to herself as she put it back again. Just then the minister came in, and looked a bit surprised to see the tramp he had observed in the service helping himself to mince pies.

"Here is a poor old man who hasn't anywhere to go for his Christmas dinner, and so I've brought him home," said his wife.

"Glad to see you," said the minister, holding out his hand and shaking his right heartily. "I noticed you in the service."

"The minister's wife practisin' the minister's sermon," he wheezed with a chuckle. "That binna bad, is it?"

"Sorry we shall have to keep you waiting a little while. Now I must run to the station, dear."

While he was eating the mince pies, the minister's wife retired to see if everything was right in the kitchen. Directly she had gone the old man quickly took a piece of paper out of his pocket and put three pies in, wrapped them up and thrust them into his

pocket. When she returned, she gave him a searching glance, and then asked, "Did you enjoy the pies?"

"Good as your singin', ma'am. I hanno tasted pies so good since I was a lad. No, I dunno think I'll have another. They binna good for the asthma."

At this juncture the minister returned, bringing with him Rufus Wentworth and his wife.

After the usual exchange of seasonable greetings, the minister said, "Here is a poor chap who was at the service this morning. He had nowhere to go for dinner, so Gwen brought him to share ours."

"Glad to see you, friend," said Rufus.

The tramp nodded and wheezed, and then put his hands to the fire as if he were cold.

"Sharp morning," Rufus went on; "but as we came through the country it was lovely. The tree sparkled as if the angels had been shaking their jewellery from the battlements of heaven down on the earth."

"Dinner is ready!" exclaimed the mistress of the Manse. "You must be hungry; I am. Did you have the carol singers as usual, dad?"

"Aye! four sets of them. And I never heard them sing better. But what do you think your Uncle Joe did? He invited them all in and gave them a hot supper of turkey and mince pies."

"Somebody must have been baking, then," rejoined Gwen; "especially if everybody ate four mince pies each," and she gave a sly glance at her visitor.

"Aye!" replied Rufus, "and Joe was, as usual, up to his tricks. When they got their turkey he urged them to try a new kind of sauce he had got to go with it. And what do you think it was? Some new kind of liquid shoe polish his housekeeper had bought! I am sorry he hanno come. I saw him on

Friday and he seemed pretty upset. He wanted to come all the time, but he wouldn't confess it. He went for me, too, like a pickpocket. Declared it had all been fixed up among us."

"I am very sorry. But I really couldn't help myself," replied Mr. Evans; "Gwen was as disappointed as anybody."

"Yes; but I'm not going to speak to Uncle Joe again," said Gwen. "He sent me the most insulting letter. Say Grace, please, Alfred."

"For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful. Amen," the minister repeated fervently, as all heads were bowed.

"I hope He will!" exclaimed Gwen, springing to her feet, "for this is what one here is about to receive," and she soundly boxed the ears of the pretended old tramp. "That one is for being an impostor. And that one is for being impudent. And that one is for stealing mince pies!" and at each sentence she gave him a resounding smack. Then she seized him by the shoulders and shook him till his teeth rattled in his head.

"Whatever is the matter?" asked the minister in alarm.

"I'll show you what is the matter," sharply replied Gwen; then, giving a tug at the old man's long whiskers, off they came, and she flung them into the fire. Next she seized his wig, and that came off. After that followed the long, ugly nose, and the countenance of Joe Wentworth stood revealed. Everybody was on their feet, gesticulating and shouting.

"You are a clever actor, Uncle Joe," Gwen declared, "but hardly clever enough to take me in. I had my doubts when we were walking along the

street about that wheeze of yours. It was a bit overdone. Then I watched you closely. When I went into the scullery you put you hand to your wig and moved it a bit. Then I was sure. Now, sir, what do you think of yourself?"

"I think the parson's got a cute wife," he replied, "who knows how to sing and how to make mince pies. And I think she has a husband that con preach better than nine parsons out of ten. And I think the turkey's gettin' cowd. And I think our Rufe should be put in jail for defaming the character of his one and only brother. And I think I'm having a merry Christmas, and I hope you are havin' the same."

"And I think, if you don't mind," replied Gwen, "I'll have those furs that are tied up in that red handkerchief."

THE END.

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